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MURDER
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by
Edmund Snell

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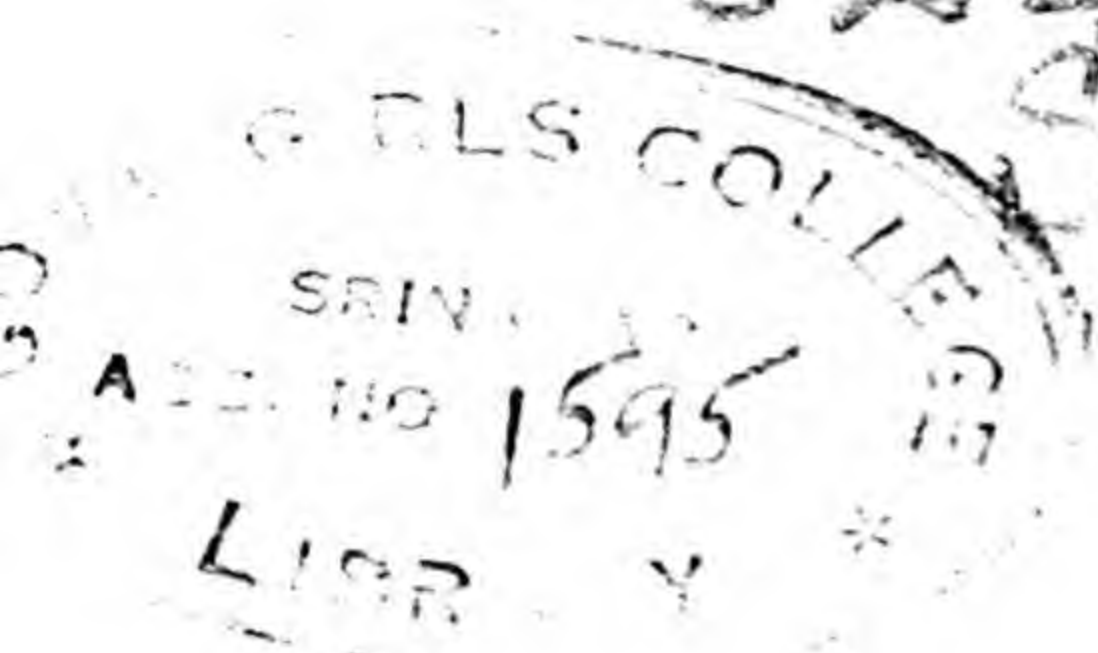
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BLUE MURDER

PART I

Chapter I

THE entire assets of Dighton & Co., General Agents, faced Alan Dighton as he opened the door of his office—a pedestal table, with a top drawer open just as he had left it, a yellow filing cabinet, a typewriter, two other tables, an archaic copying-press, three chairs and an accumulation of dusty documents.

At four o'clock on a grey November afternoon the place seemed full of ghosts—ghosts of shattered hopes, of typists who had come and gone, of office-boys crass and intelligent. The sound of other people's typewriters filling the building as if water were dripping everywhere only accentuated the fit of depression that had gripped him for weeks.

He slammed the door and went over to his chair.

The light from a green-shaded table-lamp when he switched it on fell upon a jumbled heap of letters—replies from influential friends to whom he had written for a job. Curt some of them and barely polite, others more lengthy and effusive.

He turned them over with his finger. Without reading them, he saw the phrase "Nothing doing!" served up in a score of different ways.

Still with his coat on, he moved to an untidy grate and stirred up an uninspiring column of sulphurous smoke into the palest suggestion of a flame.

A faint hope flickered and died down again.

He had heard no word from Sir Ian Taverner, his old colonel in the Wessex, the one man who had pressed him to go to him if ever he were in a hole. Perhaps he was abroad or ill; perhaps, which was far more likely, he had put Dighton's letter in the fire. It was six years since they had met—and six years was a long time. It was easier to find a man a billet at twenty-four than at thirty.

The telephone rang so suddenly that he started. He picked up the receiver.

"Dighton speaking—yes. Who is it?"

He hooked a pencil from his waistcoat and flourished it over the surface of a note-pad.

"*Who?*—Mason & Gallagher—Oh, yes—I shall be stopping here until six or perhaps a trifle after—Oh, I see. He'll be coming along here."

Frowning to himself, he turned over the pages of the telephone directory. He found Masons—dozens of them—but no Mason & Gallagher. A search through Kelly's colossal masterpiece proved similarly unenlightening. The firm was non-existent, a myth—and yet their Mr. Corlitt was calling upon him at five!

There was a mystery here—one that he could not begin to solve for at least three quarters of an hour. There was the possibility, of course, that the man at the other end had got hold of the wrong number. There were other Dightons in the book and the printing was pretty close. And yet somehow it had not sounded the voice of a man who was accustomed to make mistakes. Mason & Gallagher had come over quite clearly too.

He shrugged his shoulders and went back to the fire.

It remained to be seen whether the mysterious Mr. Corlitt showed up at all.

Five minutes later a queer, unsettled feeling set him tidying up the room. A whole bundle of wood and the two remaining lumps in the scuttle made all the difference to that fire. He hung his overcoat on the row of five hooks by the door that looked forlorn without the neat *cloche* hat and fawn shower-proof of the departed Miss Boone. Between a quarter to five and the hour three people passed along the stone corridor outside and on each occasion Dighton glanced anxiously towards a square yard of frosted glass which showed *Dighton & Co., General Agents*, the wrong way about and, in the bottom right-hand corner, *Mr. Alan Dighton*—very small. The clock outside chimed five. A minute later he caught the upward moaning of the lift, the familiar clanging of the gate and the hoarse voice of the boy, directing somebody.

The expected knock came.

"Come in!" called Dighton from his chair.

The door opened slowly and a man in a heavy overcoat entered, closing it after him.

Dighton rose.

He saw a thin, white-faced man of somewhere around forty, clean-shaven, with queer, sunken eyes and an oddly protruding chin. He stood there, leaning against the door, removing his gloves and eying him from head to foot.

"Mr. Alan Dighton?"

"Yes; that's right. You're Mr. Corlitt?"

The stranger inclined his head. He threw a swift glance round the room, pulled down the catch of the night-latch, tried the handle, then walked to the chair Dighton had placed for him and sat down.

Dighton watched him take a foolscap envelope from an inner pocket and withdraw from it a long sheet of paper. He opened it out on his knee, holding it in such a manner that the other noted what appeared to be a column of printed questions with typewritten answers opposite.

"Languages!" murmured Mr. Corlitt thoughtfully. "French, Italian, Spanish! A little German! I should improve that, if I were you. It's always useful!—D.S.O., M.C. and bar; mentioned twice in dispatches. Powerful build. Height five feet eleven and a half——"

Dighton screwed up his face.

"What have you got there? An army report?"

He bent over the desk, hoping to obtain a better view of this extraordinary document, but the other folded it hastily and returned it to its envelope, leaving photographed on Dighton's memory *INVESTIGATOR X*, in red capitals, and, scribbled in pencil across a corner, *Corlitt—for report*.

The handwriting gave him a clue.

"Sir Ian Taverner asked you to call on me?"

The imperturbable Corlitt crossed his legs and folded his hands in front of him. Apparently it was his habit not to answer questions.

"Are you married, Mr. Dighton?"

"No."

"Engaged to be married?"

Again the same answer.

With a queer, spasmodic movement, Corlitt wheeled round in his chair and stuck both elbows on the table.

"You will pardon these somewhat impertinent questions, Mr. Dighton. Although it may not be apparent to you at the moment, they are of the utmost importance."

"If I may be permitted to say so," laughed the other; "nothing is apparent to me at the moment!"

"You have no inkling of the business that has brought me here?"

"None whatever."

Corlitt frowned at the fire, removed his coat and strode to the far end of the office. He picked up a pile of filing cards from the mantelpiece, dropped

them one by one back into place, crossed to the copying-press and began screwing and unscrewing the handle like a child playing with a new toy. Almost before Dighton was aware of it, he was back at the pedestal-table, bending across it.

"Six years ago, Mr. Dighton, you were inclined to take risks—big risks. You had a penchant for hazardous undertakings—and you could be relied upon to keep your head in a crisis." A short pause. "Are you still game for adventure, Mr. Dighton?"

The man who had failed in business met his visitor's gaze steadily.

"I—er—I think so."

Corlitt drew in a deep breath.

"I want you to understand me. The brand of adventure I am suggesting is vastly different from anything to which you have been accustomed. It is one in which you will be playing a lone hand against people infinitely more clever than yourself. If you win—you will receive ample remuneration. Your success will be appreciated by those who are aware of it. There's no honour and glory about this sort of thing, Mr. Dighton. If you lose——"

He shrugged his shoulders.

Dighton nodded.

"I've got you," he said.

He found his cigarette-case and held it out to Corlitt, who shook his head slowly from side to side.

"No, thanks, Mr. Dighton."

"You don't smoke?"

For answer the other produced a straight-stemmed briar from his coat and squinted into the blackened bowl.

"The pipe habit's safest in our line of business," he declared meaningly. "We can then refuse a cigarette without being thought discourteous."

Dighton grinned.

"I only keep 'em for visitors," he returned.

"And women!" suggested Corlitt, filling up.

"And women!" echoed the younger man. "They go better than chocolates these days!"

He was feeling more cheerful already. Whatever was the outcome of this extraordinary interview, it was gratifying to know that Taverner had not gone back on his word. That peculiar, white-faced man who had taken stock of him like a farmer at a cattle show, who had compared him with the items in a printed document to see if he tallied with the description, who had even gone to the length of locking his own door before speaking, had altered his entire outlook on life in the space of fifteen minutes. Hazardous adventure! The very thought of it knocked ten years off his life. It was all he was cut out for. Surveying that musty office, with its shabby furniture and accumulation of useless papers, he realised that it was the one thing he had been yearning for for years.

He chuckled audibly. The sheer excitement of the thing was going to his head like strong wine. And to

think that, but for the grace of God, he might have been eating his heart out at an insurance office, touting unwanted volumes from door to door, signing-on with some travel agency on the strength of his knowledge of languages to escort chattering females over the Forum, the Pitti Palace or the Doges' Palace at Venice!

He could have embraced that little man, who smoked so placidly, bathed in a smoke-screen of his own making.

"Then Mason & Gallagher was just a blind?"

Corlitt smiled.

"Shall we call it a wise precaution?"

"Call it what you like. When will you want me to start?"

The other started as if roused from a reverie.

"Start?—Oh, immediately. Sir Ian suggested you should dine with him at *Donati's* to-night at seven. Ask in the hall for Mr. Gallagher."

Dighton helped him on with his coat. At the door they shook hands.

"Good luck!" said Corlitt. "It was queer you should have written to Sir Ian at that moment—providential almost. We were at our wits' end for a new man—somebody who wasn't known. Good afternoon, Mr. Dighton."

And the visitor was gone.

Chapter II

It occurred to Dighton, as he passed through the swing doors, with the rumble of Oxford Street behind him and his progress to the elevator blocked by the white-shirted guests to a masonic banquet, that *Donati's* was about the last place on earth where one would expect to enlist for a secret service job.

Secret Service! That mob of provincial and suburban gentlemen, who grouped themselves in little knots chatting with a fervour and air of careless *abandon* that suggested quick rounds of *aperitifs* at the downstairs bar, or hovered aimlessly on the outskirts, fingering their bow-ties and shooting furtive glances at their own reflections in the gilt-framed mirrors, would have jumped simultaneously from their skins at the mere mention of the phrase!

And yet, expressed in terms of commonplace phraseology, Corlitt's offer could have meant nothing else.

Remembering the lone hand he was destined to play, Dighton eyed them enviously. He saw dress-suits tailored in the year *dot*, dinner-jackets that would have sent a shudder from one end of Sackville Street to the other, cheap ready-mades setting badly on the shoulders. Sartorial shortcomings apart, these fellows had comfortable jobs somewhere, houses of their own perhaps, wives and children flourishing on incomes derived from a country that could not pay

him subsistence money! They could shout their business successes to the stars for all it mattered, while he, by a queer trick of fate, was doomed to eternal silence.

A loud-voiced man, with the appearance of a brewer and the vocal powers of a sergeant-major, shouted from the stairs and the crowd melted as if by magic.

"Reigate party, Sir?" insinuated a frock-coated sub-manager in his ear.

"Mr. Gallagher," corrected Dighton.

"Mr. Gallagher," mused the other, consulting an infallible memory. "You'll find his table on the first floor. Cloak-room downstairs, sir."

He stepped backward, with arms outspread like a signpost—and Dighton descended to the lower regions.

He glanced at his watch on the way down. He had still ten minutes to spare. Plying the communal hair-brush before a mirror let into a white-tiled wall, he found further food for reflection.

He had come prepared for a conference in a private room—a sort of second edition of Corlitt's interview. He knew enough of the geography of the place to realise that a table on the first floor signified publicity in every sense of the word.

Guided by a head-waiter through a maze of crowded tables, with an orchestra pumping out jazz and all the cutlery in existence being rattled together at the same time, he found himself confronting two empty chairs and a singularly attractive girl.

There was obviously a mistake here. He turned to explain that fact to the waiter, but his guide had

dissolved into thin air. As he hesitated, conscious all the while that people were turning in their chairs to look at him, the lady removed the cigarette from her lips and smiled at him quite openly.

"You're Mr. Dighton, aren't you?"

He produced a handkerchief and mopped his forehead.

"By Jove! so I am!—Then the fellow was right after all!"

"I'm Miss Haye—Greta Haye, you know. My uncle told me to look out for you and apologise for him. He may be a little late, but we're not to wait. Do sit down."

Dighton complied.

Seen at close-quarters, Greta Haye was more than attractive, he discovered: She was wonderfully pretty. She wore a frock of the palest shade of green, a short necklace of pearls that Dighton fancied were real, and a ring with a single emerald, worn on a finger that did not particularly matter. There was something fascinating about the poise of her dark, shingled head, the way the long lashes curled up over brown, fearless eyes, the delicate curves of her neck and shoulders.

It dawned on him suddenly that she was offering him a smoke. Remembering Corlitt's hint in time and vaguely suspecting a trap, he refused.

"No thanks," he murmured, eyeing the tortoise shell case as it was withdrawn across the table. "I—er—I'm a confirmed pipe-smoker really. In places of this sort, I fall back on my own. Quite cheap

things, you know, but they don't catch my throat.—You don't mind, do you?"

"Not in the slightest."

She watched him tapping his own brand on a silver case ornamented with a regimental crest. A ripple of laughter escaped her lips.

"How perfectly ridiculous! Didn't you notice?—They're the same sort!"

"Holy smoke!" ejaculated the adventurer. "You don't say so!"

He had just lit up when a hand fell on his shoulder and he heard Taverner's familiar chuckle.

"Alan, my boy! How are you?—Don't get up, whatever you do.—How long is it since——?"

"Six years, sir."

"Nonsense! It can't be as much as that. Let me see. It was at the *Trocadero*——"

"Six years ago," put in Dighton again, still shaking hands.

Taverner sat down.

He had grown fatter since their last meeting—fatter and a good deal older. His boiled shirt bulged like a City Alderman's. Dighton could not help noticing it.

"No, my boy," said the other, divining his thoughts. "There'll be no 'over the top and the best of luck' for me in the next war. Mine'll be a dug-out's job.—What do you say to a cocktail?"

His red face beamed like a lantern.

"Here! Waiter! Cocktails!"

"Very good, sir. How many?—three?"

Taverner raised his eyebrows at his niece, who shook her head very emphatically.

"Two then. *Manhattans*, eh, Alan?"

Dighton agreed.

So this was the dinner to which he had looked forward with a certain amount of dread! Instead of a kind of informal council of war they were discussing cocktails! Frankly, he was disappointed. Now that he had decided to take the plunge, he wanted to come down to hard facts and get away with it.

Five minutes later, a broad wink over the top of Taverner's glass reassured him.

"Greta's got a theatre engagement to-night—*Madeline's Misadventure*, isn't it?—a perfectly frivolous thing that wouldn't interest either of us. We'll run along to my place and chat over old times. I did hear murmurs of a night-club, but we'll see how we feel."

Greta looked up from her oysters.

"*The Cockatoo Club*," she interposed. "Do keep him up to it, Mr. Dighton. Reggie Moyser says it's wonderful. Quite the best show in Town."

"I'll do my best," he promised, fostering a sudden dislike of the said Reggie Moyser because she mentioned his name so glibly. Becoming oddly jealous, for no possible reason whatever, he more than suspected that the delighted patron of the *Cockatoo Club* was behind this theatre engagement. An odd state of mind for a man without a brass farthing on the eve of embarking upon a forlorn hope!

There was nothing particularly exciting about the

next half-hour. Taverner was back in Flanders taking and retaking trenches between the 'mouthfuls'; Greta was eating with one eye on the clock. She paused on her journey between the tables and came back.

"Don't drink too much whisky either of you," she implored. "I'm just worked-up for to-night. I shall be frightfully disappointed if you let me down."

She was gone with a wave of the fingers, and Taverner drew his chair closer to Dighton's.

"Afraid I've let you in for a tiring night, my boy. It's a pity, because you'll be rushed in the morning. You'll find, however, that there's method in my madness. I ought to apologise for sending Corlitt, but I daresay you understood. A priceless ass up to a point, though invaluable to me in many ways. Have a cigar."

They left *Donati's* together, and made their way to the Marble Arch on foot.

"You've had some bad luck, I hear," said Taverner as they turned into Park Lane.

"Pretty bad."

"How long 'll it take you to close down your business?"

Dighton smiled.

"About an hour, I should imagine. Virtually it's closed now. I've enough to meet my bills."

The other came to a sudden halt.

"Good!" he commented. "My flat's just here, overlooking the Park. A delightful situation, but deuced expensive! Just my niece and myself, you know. Delightful girl, what, Dighton?"

"Charming!" murmured Dighton absently, and followed Taverner in.

Two flights of imposing staircase brought them to a white-painted door. Taverner was in the act of inserting a key in the lock when it swung open and the scared face of a man-servant confronted them.

"I'm glad you've come, sir," he stammered. "We were just telephoning for the police."

Sir Ian glanced at Dighton.

"The police, Jarrett? Why the police?"

The servant pressed a hand to his forehead.

"It's Mr. Corlitt, sir. He was in the study, writing——"

Taverner pulled Dighton in and closed the door.

"Well——"

"The cook said she noticed there was a funny smell about the place, sir—like chemicals, but none of us took much notice. About ten minutes back a letter arrived by hand, addressed to you, sir. I tapped at the study door. Getting no answer, I went in—and—and—there he was, sir!"

Taverner uttered an impatient exclamation.

"How d'you mean? Of course Corlitt was there!"

"He was dead, Sir!"

"Dead!"

He made a movement as if to move down the passage, but Jarrett barred his path.

"I shouldn't go in there, sir, if I was you," he insisted, glancing wildly at Dighton. "He looks horrible, sir; perfectly horrible! *He's all blue!*"

Chapter III

TAVERNER'S jaw dropped.

The cigar he had been smoking rolled from his fingers to the carpeted floor, where it remained unheeded. He had grown so ashen and old in those last few seconds that Dighton hardly knew him.

"Get him some brandy," he whispered to Jarrett.

He caught Taverner's arm and held it firmly.

"Thanks," said the other faintly, "I shall be all right in a minute. It's these confounded cigars, you know. Mullins told me I smoked too many of 'em."

He pressed a hand to his side.

Presently he straightened himself and glared at the servant, who held a single liqueur-glass on a silver tray that trembled visibly.

"Take some yourself, Jarrett," he recommended, "and pull yourself together. You've nothing to be alarmed about. Mr. Corlitt was packing up a flask of chemical to send away for analysis. Apparently he has had an accident."

Jarrett's agitation seemed to increase as his master's composure returned.

"But it's murder, sir—blue murder! You couldn't mistake that, if you saw him. The window was wide open and there was papers all over the room."

Taverner eyed him coldly.

"Rubbish!" he retorted. "You've never seen a murder committed in your life. How do you know?" He glanced at Dighton. "I told him to be particularly careful about that flask. I suppose he dropped it or something—and the thing exploded."

Jarrett gulped.

"There was no explosion, sir. I could stake my life on that."

Taverner seized his shoulders and shook him until his teeth chattered.

"Don't be so confoundedly obstinate, Jarrett. You smelt the chemical—and you have my word for it that an accident occurred. Now get some of that stuff down you and go and explain things to the cook. You'd better give her some too. Come along, Alan."

Leaving the servant limp and dazed, staring helplessly after them, they made for a closed door at the far end of the broad corridor.

The whole atmosphere of the place exuded comfort and good taste. The crimson carpet, gleaming white enamel, powerful electric bulbs that shed a diffused radiance through bowls of English alabaster set at regular intervals along a lofty, primrose-tinted ceiling spelled *security* in letters a yard long. A solid second-floor wing of a solid town mansion, converted into flats by reason of altered circumstances!

At a point where a narrow passage jutted off to what he imagined to be the servants' quarters, Taverner paused and pushed open a door.

A strong, acrid odour assailed Dighton's nostrils as he did so. A puff of ice-cold air, blowing through the open window, chilled him to the marrow.

His companion coughed.

"You got that, Alan?" he whispered back. "Beastly, isn't it??"

The electric light was still on. Heavy curtains at the far end, that stretched almost from ceiling to floor, flapped spasmodically against an overturned table.

Taverner closed the door behind them and extended an eloquent hand towards a scene of indescribable chaos.

It was a long room, long and rather narrow, with a fireplace on the left, a second door and a small green safe on a stand. The walls were panelled in dark oak, hung with hunting pictures and a few curios. Dighton noticed a shield bearing a coat of arms over the mantelshelf, a three-tier rack of pipes and a modern, roll-top desk on the right.

And then the ghastly relic that occupied the middle of the floor caught his attention and held it riveted. It was the sprawling figure of a man, a heap of bones and shrunken flesh held together by clothes eaten in great holes, apparently by the swift action of some powerful corrosive fluid. It lay in a patch of violent blue that ran diagonally across the carpet, narrowing almost to a point by the second door, and widening like a ray until it blistered the panelling over an area six feet wide.

"Gad!" said Taverner at his elbow. "I'm glad I had that brandy!"

Dighton nodded grimly.

"Good thing Miss Haye wasn't here."

"Eh?—Oh, yes.—Jolly good thing. We shall have to keep her away for a bit."

He reached behind him and turned the key softly.

"Pull down that window, Alan, if you don't mind. You can leave it open a little at the top, just to let some of these fumes get away. Don't tread on that blue stuff, if you can help it."

Halfway across the floor, Dighton turned.

"You don't think it better to leave things just as they are? The police, I mean——"

Taverner smiled.

"You are inclined to agree with Jarrett?"

"Well, yes."

"You thought my story of the exploded flask sounded a bit thin?"

Dighton shook his head.

"It was perfectly obvious you invented that yarn to keep the servants quiet. Nobody coming into this room would jump to the conclusion that it was an accident. Besides, if there were a flask, you would expect to see pieces of it somewhere."

Taverner was standing with his back to the fire, with his hands clasped behind him, raising and lowering himself on the toes of his patent boots.

"You may close that window, Alan. It's a sheer drop outside. You can take it from me that the

intruder did not use it either to enter here or to go out. Probably he threw it open before leaving to allow the smell to get away. Try that door as you pass. It's open, isn't it?"

Dighton tried the handle. It opened quite easily, revealing the first few rungs of a spiral staircase, encased in a narrow shaft of masonry.

He shot a look of inquiry at Taverner.

"A sort of emergency staircase," the other explained. "We made an arrangement to have it bricked-in when we came. It has its uses. People come here from time to time who don't want to attract attention. The bell-push on the outside controls buzzers both in this room and in Corlitt's bedroom."

Dighton closed it and joined the other at the fire.

"You admit now that it was murder?"

Taverner clipped off the end of a fresh cigar. Taking a spill from a jar on the mantelpiece, he stooped down and held it to the flame.

"*Blue murder*, eh!" he murmured, echoing something Jarrett had said in the hall. "Rather apt that—what?"

He puffed thoughtfully for some seconds.

"You were talking of the police just now. I imagine that at the back of your mind you had visions of detectives searching for finger-prints, making measurements and all that sort of thing."

Dighton grinned.

"I suppose that was rather the idea."

"Nothing of the sort, my boy. We'll get hold of the Commissioner at his club within the next half hour or so. He'll probably send an inspector and doctor along, just for form's sake. It would be fatal if a thing like this got into the papers."

"But the assassin," gasped Dighton, "the fellow who came in here by the secret stairs and—and chucked that ghastly stuff over Corlitt. Is he getting off scot free?"

"That, my dear Alan, is where you and I relieve the police of responsibility. It is precisely why I brought you here."

"Then you knew this was going to happen?"

Taverner shook his head slowly from side to side.

"On the contrary, I was never more astonished in my life. One may be conducting a war, but one doesn't exactly expect an enemy airman to drop a bomb at G.H.Q.! Perhaps I ought to be more explicit. For some time it has been common knowledge in certain circles that a Dane, resident in Italy, Karl Ahlborg by name, has been perfecting an entirely new type of weapon. Thousands of people are doing much the same sort of thing, but Ahlborg had a reputation and was worth watching. *Ahlenite* was tried by one of our allies in the late war, but proved so destructive to the territory itself over which we were fighting that they had to give it up. I have it on the best authority that it put liquid fire in the background. Agents of all nationalities are hovering around Ahlborg's villa at this moment.

Quite apart from these, an independent crowd has come into the field, headed by a rather interesting personality who styles himself *The Lizard*. A fortnight ago one of these weapons was removed from the *Villa Sabino* by a person acting in our interests. He succeeded in sending it here through certain private channels—and we received it yesterday. I had news only this afternoon that our investigator was mysteriously murdered in a sleeping-car between the Italian frontier and Paris. That, I believe, was the work of our friend *the Lizard*."

He crossed to where the safe was standing and threw open the door to its fullest extent.

"The weapon was put in here. Our next move was to hand it over to the Ordnance authorities so that its possibilities might be tested."

His gaze travelled along the track of ominous blue until it rested on the disfigured corpse.

"I fancy it has been adequately tested to-night!"

In spite of himself Dighton shuddered.

"What a ghastly invention!"

"Horrible! But it's not a thing we can leave out of our calculations. To put it in plain English, either Ahlborg, his invention and every document relating to it must cease to exist—or *The Pocket Death* must come into our possession."

Dighton nodded.

"It would be a blessing for humanity if his laboratory were to blow up. You think *The Lizard* was personally responsible for this fresh outrage?"

"I'm sure of it," said Taverner.

He drew something from the safe and tossed it across the room.

Dighton picked it up. It was a circular bone disc, the colour of jade, about an inch and a half in diameter, with the head of a lizard impressed on one side in gold.

"The sign and superscription of possibly the best-informed scoundrel in this hemisphere," chuckled Taverner. "He likes to let you know when he's pulled off a job to his own satisfaction. Queer notion, isn't it?"

Chapter IV

BEFORE leaving the study Taverner locked the door leading to the staircase and pocketed the key. He stood for some seconds staring down at the body of his late secretary.

He flashed a look at Dighton.

"Not much left to identify him by, eh, Alan?"

The other shook his head.

"I don't know if it's my imagination," he returned, "but he seems to have shrunk somehow since we first saw him."

Taverner bent closer.

"Gad! I believe you're right. He's—he's crumbling to nothing!"

He crossed to the door, glanced along the passage to ensure that the road was clear, then held it open for the younger man to pass.

"I'm not usually addicted to nerves," he added, "but I don't mind telling you I'm mighty glad to be outside. We'll finish our chat in the drawing-room. I've some particularly fine whisky I rather wanted you to try."

Dighton noticed that he had gone oddly white again, and that the hand that fumbled with the key of this second door trembled.

"Sure, you're all right, sir?"

The other drew himself erect.

"Funny how these things take you," he murmured. "I was as right as rain in that room. See if you can fasten this door, Alan. Your fingers are stronger than mine. You'd better keep both these keys, by the way. I'm rather expecting a visitor from Paris."

"Oh, yes."

"A certain M. Daudot, late of the *Sûreté*. He was due here at eight, but I suppose he's been delayed somewhere."

Dighton tried the handle. Satisfied that the door was locked, he followed Taverner into a large, lofty room in which priceless Chinese rugs showed sections of polished parquet between. He caught a vision of costly antiques, silver candlesticks on a sixteenth century chest in an immense bay and deep, comfortable chairs encircling a red-tiled hearth whose polished surface reflected the flickering flames of an ample fire.

Taverner indicated a chair.

"Sit down, my boy, and make yourself at home. We should have been here half an hour ago, but for poor Corlitt's misfortune. Ah! That's better! Can you reach that bell, Alan?"

He glanced at the clock on the mantelshelf.

"I'll give myself ten minutes and then I must be off. I had some difficulty in getting hold of Monsieur Daudot, you know. It took Corlitt a month to find him, and another three weeks to persuade him to talk. Oddly enough, he was one of the first people

to handle *Ahlenite* during the war and he knew Ahlborg personally."

He saw Jarrett hesitating in the doorway and called across to him:

"Bring in the whisky."

"Very good, sir. Anything else?"

"And cigars, Jarrett."

"And cigars, sir."

The door closed softly.

"What I want to know is," broke in Dighton, "if the British Government want to get hold of this new stunt, why don't they make Ahlborg an offer?"

Taverner snapped his fingers.

"They have, but it was refused."

"Refused, eh? On what grounds?"

"I can't exactly tell you. Ahlborg, I am given to understand, had exaggerated views as to the monetary value of his invention. Apart from that, he is extraordinarily sensitive. He had several interviews with high officials both here and at Rome. Negotiations were moving along quite favourably when something was said which offended him—and he declined to discuss the matter further. France, owing to their discontinuing to employ *Ahlenite*, is also on his bad books. Monsieur Daudot will give us further information about this when he comes."

Jarrett returned with the decanter and cigars. He set the tray on a small table between them and withdrew.

"Jarrett," shouted Taverner, as the door closed: "have the radiator turned on in Mr. Corlitt's room and leave this door ajar."

"Very good, sir."

"Oh, and 'phone for the car. You'd better do that first."

"I see, sir."

Sir Ian removed the stopper from the decanter.

"Corlitt's room is just opposite," he explained. "If the buzzer goes while we are talking I shall hear it. Monsieur Daudot will arrive by the emergency stairs. I should prefer you to wait in Corlitt's old room while I am out. Put a rug or something over the thing in the study and let him in. Greta can go home with her friends; I shall see to that on my way. We'll pick her up later and take her to the club. I'll come along with the Scotland Yard people myself and look in on you for the key, but I don't want you to put in an appearance. Just keep Daudot talking until they and the ambulance have gone."

Dighton picked up his glass.

"Good enough! You're still keen on the *Cockatoo Club*?"

Taverner pushed himself up.

"Why not?" It'll help us to keep our minds off the —er—off recent events and I don't want Greta back here until the servants have got that accident theory firmly rooted in their minds."

He looked at the clock again, straightened out the folds of his evening waistcoat, and hurried out into

the hall. Within five minutes he was back again with his overcoat on and a large envelope between his fingers.

"You'll find some lists in there—lists of addresses abroad. You can fill in your time memorising them. How is your memory, by the by?"

Dighton smiled.

"Pretty good."

Taverner drained his tumbler and set it down.

"You'll find a good memory your finest asset," he declared. "Among other things, cultivate a memory for faces. A man who can attach a name to a face immediately he sees it is invaluable. Corlitt could do that. I tell you, Alan, that man was a walking *Who's Who* and *Encyclopædia Britannica* rolled into one. I'm afraid I shall have some difficulty in replacing him."

"The car's waiting, sir," announced Jarrett from the doorway.

"Good! I'm just coming."

"Mind you," continued Taverner in a low voice, "I never liked the man. He was—well, he was not quite our type, if you understand me. But he was efficient—uncannily so—and there are circumstances, after all, in which the personal side must be pushed into the background. Greta loathed him!"

The other raised his eyebrows.

"She did, did she?"

"Loathed him like poison. It used to puzzle me at times. There's sometimes a lot in a woman's

intuition, y'know—Well, I'll be off. That radiator should have warmed the room by now. Stick on your overcoat if it hasn't. Daudot's a little bearded chap with a limp; you can't mistake him."

He smiled at Dighton and was gone.

The adventurer stuck the envelope in an inside pocket and knocked out his pipe in the grate. He heard Jarrett closing the hall door and his muffled footsteps moving towards the kitchen.

Presently he strolled to the bay. Pulling aside the curtain he saw street-lights, each with a separate halo, buses with cold-looking outside passengers, iron railings and the mist-enveloped park beyond.

The curtain fell back into place, and he moved to his post wearing a puzzled expression on his handsome face.

He had stepped into a new world!

Chapter V

DIGHTON'S worst enemy could not have accused him of *nerves*—and yet there was something strangely uncanny about that lonely vigil in Corlitt's room, surrounded by the personal belongings of a man who had passed out so recently and with such tragic suddenness.

He sat, with chair drawn up to the cheerful glow of the electric radiator, trying in the light of the reading-lamp to memorise the data Taverner had given him, waiting for the whirring note of the buzzer that never came. His gaze kept wandering away from the typewritten sheets to a pair of felt slippers propped against the brass fender-rail, a trouser-press Corlitt had rested against the wall, folded pyjamas, with bold blue stripes, lying on the single bed where a maid had turned back the clothes.

A faint odour hung about the room, the smell of some toilet article the secretary had been in the habit of employing; hairwash perhaps. Away there in the shadows beyond the radius of the lamp's rays were collars, ties, a pile of handkerchiefs—little, intimate things that made it difficult to realise Corlitt would never use them again.

He rose suddenly and switched on the other light.

Presently he began pacing the room, with his hands clasped behind him, pausing every now and again for the sound of Taverner's key in the door, anything in fact that would serve to break the depressing silence.

He looked at his watch: Taverner had been gone an hour. It was quarter past ten. And just over three hours ago he had been jostled by a mob clustering for a masonic banquet! It seemed incredible.

Pictures piled themselves in his memory; of an officious sub-manager at *Donati's* directing him to the cloak-room, of his first meeting with Greta, cocktails and the walk along Oxford Street. Other pictures followed; Jarrett's white face at the entrance, a cigar burning a hole in a carpet and the ghastly heap in that ray-shaped patch of blue.

A voice echoed in his brain, so vividly that it might have been addressing him only a second back:

"Are you still game for adventure, Mr. Dighton?"

He smiled grimly over the stem of an empty pipe.

Well, the adventure had begun! Almost before he knew where he was, he was up to his neck in it! War, grimmer than he had ever known it, was being waged all round him. Nations that talked of peace at Geneva were struggling for the possession of the latest device for human destruction.

A door closed suddenly. He thought it was Jarrett in the other wing.

Almost without warning he found himself struggling with an overwhelming desire to go back to the study. A second inspection of the chamber of death might reveal new facts, clues that would throw fresh light on the identity of Corlitt's assailant. The desire became an obsession. Ten minutes later he had drawn the larger key from his pocket and was holding it to the light. Another five minutes and he had made up his mind.

He took the travelling-rug from the foot of the bed and went softly out into the passage.

He could hear the clock in the room opposite ticking away merrily, the dull rumbling of traffic in the road outside. Listening outside the study, he could detect Jarrett's voice from the far end of the passage—Jarrett, a little steadier now, giving the cook the benefit of his experience in the world's affairs!

He turned the key and went in.

The fire had gone out. He knew this before his fingers had found the switch. There was so little of Corlitt now that it scarcely shocked him—a shape that might almost have been a shadow—a long heap of blue dust that the draught from the door disturbed.

He arranged the rug carefully and stepped back.

The room was just as they had left it: The hunting pictures, one slightly askew; the pipe-rack, Taverner's odd trophies, the safe, the roll-top desk. . . .

Listening all the while for the sound of Taverner's return, he moved swiftly along the walls, paused by the safe, the overturned table, hoping in a dim sort of way to hit upon some clue. He had not the ghost of an idea what he was looking for, was prepared not to be disappointed if this second inspection proved as abortive as the first. And yet, the desire to pursue some definite course of action rather than sit in morbid inactivity drove him on.

He passed the thing three times before he saw it—a man's dark, high-crowned hat, lying by the wall in the shadow of the desk!

Wildly excited, he pounced upon it, retreated with it towards the passage, intending to examine it in Corlitt's room. Before he had reached the door initials on the stained band inside brought him to a standstill—little oval aluminium things such as Continental hatters employ, with the silver letters *E.D.*

Daudot! The man from Paris who was expected at eight! His brain reeled. Then he had called—had been in that room before the tragedy. Corlitt had seen him. . . .

Still turning the thing over between his fingers, he sat down. Carried away by the importance of this discovery, he did not notice the beads of perspiration which stood out on his forehead, forgot even that he was cold. He felt himself on the brink of something stupendous, something that Taverner himself had overlooked.

He tried to see how it all fitted in with what Taverner had told him: The secret agent murdered in a *wagon-lits* between the Italian Frontier and Paris. Corlitt's extended visit to Paris to persuade the Frenchman who knew Ahlborg personally to talk. If Daudot had come to Park Lane with honest intent, why had he departed so abruptly without waiting for Taverner? This new chief of his, this man who called him by his Christian name and had commanded his unit in Flanders, had taken it for granted that the assassin was *The Lizard*. The discovery of the green disc appeared to have given his deduction confirmation.

He clenched the fingers of his right hand and allowed them to open slowly.

Monsieur Daudot was *The Lizard* or, conversely, the leader of the gang of whose existence Sir Ian was already aware had impersonated Daudot in order to obtain admittance by the private stairs.

Charvoz, Rue de la Paix, the hatters whose name appeared on the band, might be able to remember who their customer was. He would like to follow up that clue, to pursue his investigations to Daudot's address in the French capital.

A fresh thought struck him. The hat, which had brought this possibility to light, which had forged a chain of evidence that appeared to Dighton complete—furnished at the same time its one weak link. Unless he had been disturbed at the psychological moment, it seemed incredible that so expert

a criminal would have left without his hat. Still more inconceivable that he should have forgotten an article emblazoned with incriminating initials. *The Lizard* had little to fear in leaving the token; it merely concentrated attention upon the guise in which he was wont to perpetrate an outrage. The hat, on the other hand, gave away a useful alias. He could be traced in Paris as Monsieur Daudot.

Perhaps Jarrett had disturbed him with the letter addressed to Taverner.

A sudden noise from the far side of the subsidiary door brought him to his feet. He heard the rasp of metal on metal, a sharp *click* and then, with a swiftness that precluded all hope of strategic retreat, the door was thrust open to its fullest extent and a man stepped into the room.

Between the sound and the apparition it had flashed across Dighton's brain that Daudot had come back: Daudot, the assassin, returning for his property. But the grim figure that confronted him, bringing with him the damp chill air of the bricked-in shaft, was not bare-headed. He wore a broad-brimmed grey velour and a dark blue, belted trench-coat with the collar turned up. The space between brim and collar was filled with a grotesque mask of a peculiar, dazzling whiteness, with circles of amber talc that concealed the eyes. A jade-rimmed monocle, suspended on a length of broad, black tape, rested on a fold in his

coat, and yellow driving gauntlets covered his hands.

At sight of Dighton he stiffened and a sound broke the stillness—a sharp intake of breath behind the mask. A hand shot to a side-pocket and, even as he cleared the space between them with rapid strides, the adventurer was aware of a strange bulky weapon being withdrawn with difficulty. It was clear when Dighton's fist shot out—a thing with a broad, stumpy barrel and twisted, insulated wires which seemed to connect to some hidden container. . . .

The adventurer's weight was behind that blow.

Aimed upwards, it caught the edge of the mask and the chin beneath, landing with such terrific force that it lifted the lighter man from his feet and pitched him clean through the doorway by which he had come.

Dighton, nursing the fist that had wrought the damage, heard the first stage of that precipitate, involuntary descent. Stepping between the safe and the wall, he kicked the door shut as a noise came from the shaft like the bursting of a steam-pipe. A second later he had clapped a handkerchief to his nose and retreated to the passage, flying headlong from a cloud of tinted smoke that was curling under the door.

Chapter VI

WITHIN two minutes of relocking the study door Dighton was in the street, looking for the lower entrance to the shaft. He found it presently, a quaint Gothic archway which he suspected Taverner had helped to design, with an iron-studded door that apparently was never fastened. More fumes met him as he pushed it inwards, but there was no sign of *The Lizard*.

He paused on the landing on his way up to survey a grazed knuckle. This and a high-crowned hat was all he had to show for an evening's work. A million to one chance had offered itself of cornering the masked intruder and wresting back *The Pocket Death* for his chief. The odds had proved too great—and yet he was by no means disappointed. He had every reason to be thankful he had not shared Corlitt's fate.

He was back by the radiator when Taverner looked in for the key. The other nodded at him and smiled, but said nothing. Footsteps passed along the passage, a door opened and closed again and Dighton heard the sound of distant voices. He had almost fallen off to sleep when Taverner beckoned him out.

"Come into the drawing-room," he said, rubbing his hands together. "The coast's quite clear now. We've seen the last of poor Corlitt. I suppose Monsieur Daudot failed us?"

Dighton frowned.

"Nobody has been here since you left," he returned "except *The Lizard*."

"*The Lizard*?"

"Oh, yes," pursued Dighton, closing the drawing-room door after them, "I had quite a set-to with him. Knocked him down your spiral staircase, and got out of range before he blazed off a second round from that gun. I'm afraid I lost him though."

The other stared at him in amazement.

"How did he get in?"

"Let himself in with a key—Corlitt's key, I should imagine. I was in there covering up the poor devil at the time. He seemed quite surprised to see me!"

Taverner went over to the decanter.

"You're a cool devil, Alan," he declared. "I knew I was right when I sent for you."

"You don't think I ought to have held him then?"

"Held him," echoed the other, flourishing the glass stopper. "With that ghastly thing in his hand! It amazes me to think you got close enough to hit him. How's that for a *peg*?"

"If you're looking at me, sir," laughed Dighton, "it's a bit stiff!"

"Nonsense!" retorted his host. "I've seen you lower a deal more than that. If your swallow's still as good as your punch, you can do it again!—*The Lizard*, eh! Wonder what made him come back."

"This," said the younger man. He brought the

felt hat from behind his back and held it so that Sir Ian could read the initials inside.

"Afraid I exceeded my duties to-night. I tried my hand at a little detective work—and this is the result."

He eyed the other anxiously, but Taverner's red face betrayed no trace of annoyance. He reached for the hat and examined it closely.

"*E.D.?*" he muttered presently. "*E.D.?*"

"Etienne Daudot," suggested Dighton quietly.

Taverner started. He glared at his companion for some moments before replying.

"*Emile* Daudot, my boy, not *Etienne*. It was a damn good shot nevertheless. I wonder what it all means."

"Does it strike you that Daudot and *The Lizard* may be one and the same?"

Taverner pursed up his lips.

"Hardly likely, I think. Here! Drink up, my boy. We've to pick up Greta in Kensington in a quarter of an hour."

He bent down to the fire to warm his hands.

"No," he continued with conviction, "I'm afraid that theory won't wash. I'm sending you to Italy to-morrow, by the way. You can put in a night or two in Paris on your way South.—Pity Daudot couldn't stop to see me. I'd give a lot to know what he told Corlitt."

"But look here, sir," persisted Dighton. "No fellow in possession of his senses wanders about London on a night like this without a hat! Perhaps

The Lizard outed him before he got here and threw in the hat for a blind."

Taverner was buttoning his overcoat.

"Anything may have happened," he admitted. "We can consider it more fully in the morning. Meantime—the *Cockatoo Club*! No need to worry about the house. Scotland Yard have insisted on putting a man outside. They have to do something, you know, to justify their existence. Can you *Charleston*, by the by?"

"Oh, yes."

Taverner heaved a sigh of relief.

"That's all that really matters at the moment," he laughed. "From now until cockcrow it's Greta's shout. It's a mad age, Alan! If you can come up to the scratch as a dancing-partner, my niece 'll love you for ever!"

Dighton flushed.

"I don't think there's much fear of her doing that."

The other had reached the door already, and was waiting to switch out the light.

They found Jarrett in the hall. He was glassy-eyed and staring, and Dighton fancied he swayed a little as he held open the door. It struck him that the servant had put his master's remedy for panic to the test a trifle too thoroughly!

"You can go to bed now," said Taverner. "I don't suppose we shall be back before six. Afraid it's been a disturbing evening for all of us. There's nothing startling in the study now, by the way; nothing whatever. Er—good night, Jarrett."

As they passed down the stairs, Dighton looked back.

The door was still partly open, and through the narrow aperture, Jarrett's lined face jutted out like a hideous gargoyle.

Outside the mist had developed into a fog. The park palings were no longer visible, and belated taxis, hooting strenuously, flitting like phantom chariots in a world of blurred lights.

Taverner's long blue saloon was waiting by the pavement, with a dapper chauffeur, as smart as a cavalryman, stamping up and down to keep himself warm.

"Queen's Gate Mansions," murmured Sir Ian, climbing in.

Dighton followed.

Glancing at his companion a few moments later he discovered that he had fallen off to sleep!

It did not altogether surprise him. On the contrary, he was amazed at the extraordinary energy and freshness he had shown up to now. Lolling back in luxurious upholstery, he wondered if this were a normal day in Taverner's life—periods of strenuous excitement punctuated by snatches of sleep in his car. Considering the long programme confronting him on the morrow, he felt tempted to follow his example.

It seemed an eternity before they reached Hyde Park Corner. Along Knightsbridge the fog had lifted a bit and there were clear patches of which their driver took full advantage. The halt at Queen's Gate was as good as an alarm clock to Taverner. He was

alert in an instant, and out on the pavement almost before the other had realised he was awake.

"I shan't be two shakes," he declared and went up the steps.

Reaching over, the chauffeur let down a folding seat.

"Wretched night!" ventured Dighton.

"Wretched, sir."

A glimpse at his profile set the adventurer's memory working.

"Weren't you in the 9th Wessex?"

"Yes, sir. Remember you well, sir."

"Hodges?" suggested Dighton.

A smile stole over the chauffeur's habitually impassive face.

"That's right, sir. Not bad times, taking the rough with the smooth of it. Wish I was back there sometimes."

He jumped out suddenly to hold open the door for Greta.

"Hullo!" she cried to Dighton. "So you didn't let me down after all! Please don't get up. You look so delightfully comfortable—and the little seat's mine always, isn't it, Hodges?"

"Always, Miss," returned Hodges dutifully.

Dighton capitulated with a shrug of the shoulders. There was no use disputing her claim to the third seat, because all the available evidence was in her favour. Added to that, she was sitting in it already!

"Uncle's talking to Lady Turnham," she explained. "He's frightfully talkative to-night: He

usually is when he's excited about something. He goes on and on and on—until somebody has to drag him away.—*Has* anything exciting happened to-night?"

Dighton blinked.

"It all depends what you call exciting. War reminiscences are usually pretty stirring, you know."

He thought he had got out of that very well!

"How many whiskies?"

"Two."

"Honestly?"

Dighton nodded.

"I think that's absolutely wonderful."

"How was the show?"

Greta clasped her hands over one knee and stared at the single bulb glowing in the roof.

"Perfectly priceless!—Haven't you seen it?"

He shook his head.

"You really ought to. The girl who plays Madeline is quite pretty and Ralston's screamingly funny.—Lady Turnham would have a box. I'm not altogether struck on boxes, are *you*? They give you such a one-sided view of the stage."

Dighton usually patronised the Upper Circle, but he did not say so. He was thinking what a change a woman made in the atmosphere of a car, a room, a club—anywhere. Greta seemed to have hit upon the one perfume in the world that fascinated him. He just lay back in his seat and revelled in her beauty, her youth, her unfailing *joie de vivre*.

"Have a cigarette?" he suggested, holding out his case.

"No, thank you," she returned with well-assumed hauteur. "I prefer to smoke my own. Quite cheap things, you know; but they don't catch my throat!"

Dighton winced.

"I say," he protested, "that's too bad! Lord! what a wicked thrust! Right under the fifth rib!"

"Don't you think you deserve it?"

They both burst out laughing.

"At any rate, you'll take one now?"

Greta thought.

"On one condition—and one only."

"And that is——?"

"That you promise to forget that stupid war—and dance with me the whole night."

Dighton bent forward.

"My dear lady," he murmured, "the cigarette is yours. I know of nothing that could please me better!"

She regarded him steadily for some seconds, then helped herself from his case.

He struck a match and held it out to her. The operation of lighting-up brought their heads very close.

"I wonder how many girls you've said that to?" she whispered, conscious of the proximity of Hodges.

"A goodish few," he admitted easily; "but I fancy I meant it to-night."

The street-door of Lady Turnham's house slammed and the return of Sir Ian Taverner brought an end to their conversation.

Chapter VII

THE Cockatoo Club was evidently a product of the mad age of which Taverner had spoken in the drawing-room. Its entrance was approached by area steps necessitating a somewhat precarious descent from the pavement of Lower Regent Street. Dighton, following the others curiously, was struck by the lack of outside advertisement. But for the muffled strains of dance-music and the steady stream of well-dressed people approaching this subterranean rendezvous from the fog he might have suspected his host had lost the way.

An unglazed swing-door, furnished with a silent self-closing device, admitted them to a narrow passage and a veritable blaze of light, which contrasted oddly with the yellow pall without. At the far end, before a counter where cards of membership were examined with a minuteness which the adventurer thought was a little overdone, an attendant relieved them of their coats and ushered them presently into a large hall furnished with little tables, an ample dancing space and a curtained stage.

To the right of the stage a small orchestra was tuning up. The walls were ornamented from end to end with grotesque zoological designs, executed apparently by a cubist painter with an eye for vivid colouring. Figures of cockatoos were painted on

the lamp-shades, burnt into the crockery, embroidered even on the corners of the table-cloths. The proprietors of the establishment were evidently anxious that their symbol should not be overlooked.

A waiter, very pale and very foreign-looking, escorted them to the table Sir Ian had reserved and retired to a discreet distance, awaiting orders.

Conscious of a preponderance of smart women and well-groomed escorts, Dighton sat down amid a Babel of conversation and laughter.

"Pernicious habit—this night-club business!" Taverner whispered across the table; but he seemed to be enjoying it all the same.

He kept removing the inevitable cigar from his lips, bowing and beaming and smiling until the younger man began to wonder if there was a single person in London he didn't know. Greta, however, gave him little time for reflection. The moment the orchestra struck up she was on her feet, with flushed cheeks and parted lips and a look at Dighton which told him he would have his work cut out to keep his promise.

"I suppose you're used to this sort of thing?" he asked when Taverner and his cigar had faded into the distance.

Greta's forehead puckered up into a frown.

"I dance quite a lot, if that's what you mean."

"I was thinking of night-clubs."

The girl laughed.

"My dear man! It's the first I've ever been to."

"Really?"

"Really. I've been plaguing uncle to bring me here for weeks. I can't tell you how glad I am you turned up. I've tried to teach uncle to *Charleston*, but he's past all hope. You haven't told me what you are."

Dighton avoided the erratic flight of a youth who seemed rather drunk and a plump girl who looked uncomfortable.

"Me? Oh, I'm nothing in particular at the moment. As a matter of fact, I'm closing down a business I had in the City and meditating looking for something abroad."

Greta sighed.

"How perfectly tragic! Uncle tells me you did wonderful things in the war. Didn't you save his life, or something, when a German threatened him with a hand-grenade?"

He pretended to reflect.

"Where was this act of heroism supposed to have taken place?"

"Flanders, I fancy."

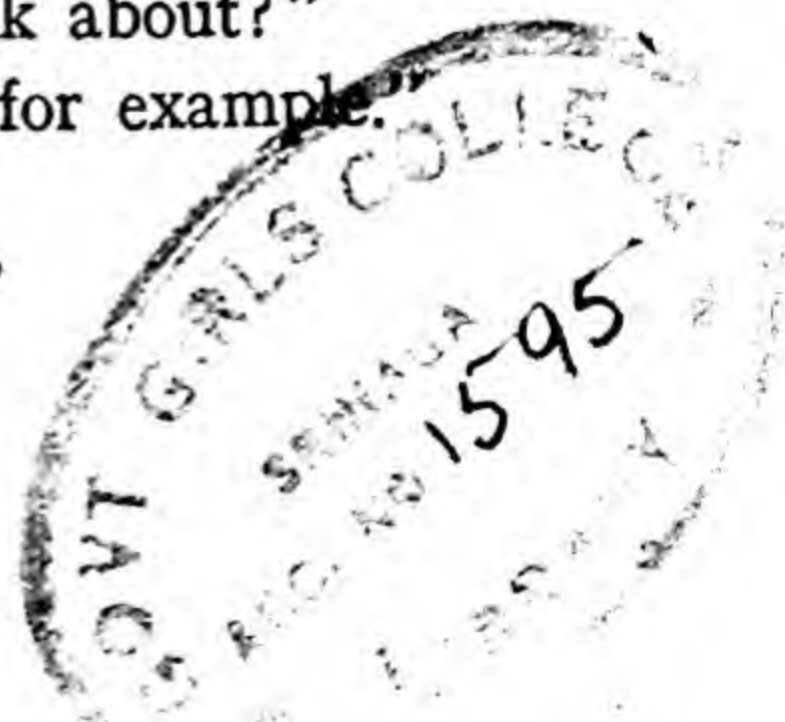
"Quite a lot happened in Flanders," he responded with a non-committal air. "If the truth were known, I expect we rescued each other from awkward predicaments very frequently. I thought we weren't going to talk about the war!"

"What would you like to talk about?"

"Anything interesting. *You*, for example."

She coloured slightly.

"Would that be interesting?"



"Very—to me."

Greta pouted.

"I warn you you won't find it very thrilling. Where shall I begin? I'm twenty-two——"

Dighton wrinkled his forehead.

"As much as that?"

"Well, twenty-one and eight months. That's nearly twenty-two, isn't it? Mother died when I was seven and daddy's away in Rome, painting pictures which nobody ever buys. I suppose he found me a nuisance, because he handed me over to Uncle Ian, and only writes to me at Christmas and my birthday. How do I go on? Like the actresses' confessions in theatre programmes, I suppose. Favourite sports—dancing and riding. Pet aversions—rice-pudding and Mr. Corlitt——"

She paused suddenly and looked up at Dighton.

"Why did you make that face?"

"Did I? I didn't mean to. So you don't like your uncle's secretary?"

The girl shuddered.

"He's a perfectly loathsome beast. I squash him whenever I get the chance, but he's as thick-skinned as a rhinoceros. He tried to make love to me once and I told uncle. There was an awful row about it. I hoped uncle would get rid of him, but he didn't. Aren't you bored to tears?"

"On the contrary, I'm deeply interested."

"I believe you're pulling my leg!"

"My dear girl," protested Dighton, "I've never been so serious about anything in my life."

The music stopped abruptly.

"Thank you," said the adventurer, thrilled even more by the light touch of her fingers on his arm than when he had danced with her.

"Please don't thank me," she whispered. "It was wonderful. I enjoyed every bit of it."

Dighton did not know it, but anyone in the room who had noticed them could have told him he had made a conquest. It was written in her eyes, the bright patch of colouring that showed on either cheek, in the eagerness with which she hung on every word that fell from the lips of this fair, muscular giant.

In vulgar parlance, it was *a case*, and not such a hopeless one as Dighton had at first believed.

Greta, the niece of a man who, for all he knew, was employing him out of charity, had seemed as inaccessible as Mount Everest: Greta, the daughter of a poor artist, appeared infinitely nearer his level.

There followed a seemingly interminable meal, with dancing between the courses; brief respites when the curtain of the little stage swung noiselessly aside and the professional entertainers of the establishment indulged in a disjointed carbalet show, and presently he had Greta in his arms again and they were swaying with the streams of dancers between the tables, revelling in the passing joys of what was a halcyon night for both of them.

Paper hats made their appearance, comic masks, false noses, gigantic balloons that bumped and

bounced and burst amid a joyous bombardment of coloured streamers. Lights were flashed out and on again, coloured lights bathed the room, changing so bewilderingly that women screamed and couples collided with other couples good-humouredly.

In the midst of one of these black-outs Dighton kissed Greta.

He kissed her because he wanted to, because in a dim sort of way he realised that she expected it. It was a brief salute, because the movements of the hidden electrician were as irregular as those of the pianist in *musical chairs*; it was complete, because firm, soft lips hung on his and were reluctantly withdrawn.

"Why did you do that?" she whispered when the lights went up. "I ought to be very angry with you."

"But you're not angry?"

"I—don't—know."

Dighton felt guilty when he sat down opposite Taverner. He felt exultant, too. He could have pressed upon the concealed manipulator of switches every single cent he possessed.

"You're having a thin time, sir," he said.

Taverner shook his head.

"It does me good to see you two young people enjoying yourselves. Only wish I could emulate your excellent example, but my dancing days are over."

He was wearing a false nose *à la Cyrano de Bergerac*, which clashed with the redness of his cheeks and gave a strange note to his voice.

"Hark at the poor old man!" laughed Greta. "Why, you're no age at all—for these days. Fifty-eight isn't old, is it, Mr. Dighton?"

Her uncle's hand fell on her arm.

"Never you mind how old I am. There's Mrs. Trevelyan on the other side of the room, just behind that woman in mauve. Trot over and talk to her for a minute. I want a word with Dighton in private."

His last sentence was voiced in the same casual, half-bantering tone, and yet it descended upon the younger man like a cold douche. For a brief space he suspected Taverner was going to tackle him about Greta, suspected that he noticed some strangeness in their manner at the conclusion of that last dance.

The lights lowered again for another fragment of cabaret and, as they dimmed, a man came from the shadows and dropped into the chair Greta had just vacated.

The newcomer and Taverner gripped hands under the cloth.

"Alan," pursued the latter, "I want you to know Marney. There are few better men this side of the *Styx*—and you're destined to see a good deal of one another. Marney, this is Dighton, my adjutant in France and a fellow to be relied on in an emergency."

"How d'you do?" murmured Dighton.

Marney capped his salutation with a curt nod.

He was short and dapper, with the build of a jockey, a long, lined face and an abundance of gold teeth. He spoke with an American accent, and not

once during the course of their first interview did his thin lips pucker into the semblance of a smile. It was long after this that the man who now hesitated on the threshold of the most dangerous occupation in existence caught a glimpse of the iron nerve that lurked beneath an unprepossessing exterior and discovered the presence of muscles like fibres of drawn steel.

"Well," he drawled presently, "and what d'you think of this little show? Pretty dandy, eh?"

"An excellent institution," returned Dighton, who was seeing everything through rose-coloured spectacles. "It's the first time I've been here."

Marney shot a glance at Taverner.

"May be the last, eh, Chief? You never know what's waiting for you round the corner—No, thanks. I'm not drinking. I've got what I like over there—and I never mix."

He bent over the table.

"Never know me when you see me out. Drop in, if you want me. Taverner'll tell you where."

Sir Ian was drumming with his fingers upon the table-cloth.

"Somebody called to-night and took that back," he said.

Marney whistled softly.

"You don't say!"

"Dighton here found him with it a little later—and hit him with his fist before he could use it. Knocked him clean down those stairs."

This time Marney held his hand.

"Hell!" he muttered. "You're as good as you look—and that's saying a whole lot! Call around sometime when things are quiet. Taverner'll tell you."

His fingers slipped from Dighton's and he was gone.

Taverner heaved a sigh of relief.

"You've made a hit there, Alan," he whispered, "and I'm glad. He can be as insulting as the dickens when he chooses, and he doesn't take to strangers too easily. I'll tell you more about him in the morning."

Much to Greta's disappointment, her uncle pleaded drowsiness shortly before four. A taxi, procured through the office, whirled them back to Park Lane through squads of street-cleaners, and Dighton learned to his relief that the room he was to occupy until breakfast was not that of the defunct secretary.

Greta and he were left alone in the drawing-room—two people looking a little tired and jaded by the dead ashes of a fire.

"When are you going away?" she demanded after an awkward pause.

"To-morrow," he answered dully.

She stared at him, uncomprehending.

"To-morrow!"

"I'm afraid so. Would you like me to write to you?"

"Oh, my dear!" she whispered brokenly, and buried her face in her hands.

Chapter VIII

DIGHTON took the night boat, via Southampton, choosing this in preference to the Dieppe route because it ensured him a better night's rest.

A porter found him an empty First in the fore-end of the train, and he just dropped into the nearest corner that offered and closed his eyes.

Lord! but he was tired!—so dead-beat that he felt that he would never want to move again.

It had been the longest day that he had ever known. Taverner—a very different Taverner now that business was to be discussed—had hammered hard facts into him throughout the morning. He had taken him through a portrait gallery of people to keep in with, a collection of photographs and sketches of others to be handled warily. Then there had arisen the question of codes, the various means of communication between Dighton and his chief and the all-important question of salary.

Between noon and one-thirty Dighton had lunched in the City, arranged for the disposal of his office furniture and settled the few remaining bills. *Dighton & Co., General Agents*, was a thing of the past. It embodied a period of failure that he wanted to forget as quickly as possible—and yet the final closing of that familiar door brought something like a lump into his throat. Behind the incessant

slogging to make ends meet, the worries of a business-man with the fates against him, there had always been a sense of freedom that was to be denied to him in future.

"You will act on your own initiative," Taverner had told him over and over again. But Dighton knew as well as he knew anything that he would only be a cog in a vast, intricate machine, that orders would come to him to be carried out, and that the real driving force in the organization to which he now belonged was Taverner himself.

As far as his journey to Italy was concerned, he was given to understand he was filling a gap created by the murder of a secret agent in a trans-continental sleeping-car. An authority higher than the baronet limited his establishment to a certain fixed number, beyond which he was not permitted to go. Taverner had not created a vacancy to bestow a favour on an old comrade: It had been a case of dead men's shoes.

In the nebulous haze which surrounded Dighton's immediate horizon three personalities stood out with alarming distinctness; Emile Daudot, the man with a limp, *The Lizard* and Karl Ahlborg, the inventor of *The Pocket Death*.

Taverner attached little importance to the business which was to delay Dighton in Paris, refusing point-blank to believe that Daudot was *The Lizard* in another guise. He admitted that a newcomer to

the game to which he had devoted the greater portion of his life might hit upon a point which he himself had overlooked, but insisted that, if such had been the case, Corlitt would have ferretted it out long ago. His changed attitude towards the dead secretary amused Dighton. When he had believed him to be alive, Corlitt had been a priceless ass; now that he was defunct, he shouted his virtues to the skies!

"Get what you can out of Daudot," was his final advice, "and let me know the result. If he jibs, fix up another appointment with me. Oh, and give him his hat. He may want it!"

The entire afternoon and most of the evening, almost up to the moment Dighton had to leave to catch his train, he had devoted to the creator of *Ahlenite* and its more startling successor, leaving imprinted on the younger man's memory a portrait of an enormous, bearded Scandinavian, with a colossal conceit in his own accomplishments and eccentricities that verged on madness. Leaning back in his corner, with his coat-collar turned up, only failing through over-tiredness to drop off altogether, Dighton could picture that villa at Rapallo, its rambling, unpicturesque laboratories and the hungry pack of Alsations that served as an effective guard.

Ahlborg, from what motive it was difficult to conceive, had stirred up a veritable furore in the Foreign Offices of every nation that mattered, had

Acc No 1595

dangled his ghastly dope under the noses of prospective purchasers—and then proceeded to name a figure which was as ridiculous as it was prohibitive.

Nor had he stopped at *The Pocket Death*, for Taverner spoke of things on tripods like machine-guns, with a range that made them effective upon infantry and aircraft alike.

“You need have no qualms,” he had said, “if ever you are ordered to take definite steps against this man. He is a menace to civilisation. He imagines he holds the world in the hollow of his hand—and he wants to play with it for as long as he is able. That’s just as it may be. As long as he plays, nobody minds. But immediately he stops playing, it behoves us to use every means in our power to thwart him.”

Dighton did not care altogether for the idea of taking *definite steps*: As a cold proposition, looked at from a distance, an attack upon a maniac with the means at hand of annihilating armies, seemed tantamount to suicide.

As a kind of side-issue, thrown in as it were as an undesirable makeweight, came *The Lizard*. And *The Lizard* was in possession of one of Ahlborg’s weapons, with four rounds undischarged!

He was dozing now, with the rushing of steam in his ears, the rumbling of a truck heavy with the luggage of some late arrival and the sound of hurrying footsteps on the platform outside. Presently

these noises faded out altogether and he was flying headlong over a limitless desert, flattening out whenever one of those blue rays that searched the heavens dipped suddenly to earth. Ahlborg kept appearing in his dream, attired as a German officer, directing the movements of a host of crouching gunners. And then he was running again, pumping lead into a threatening, invulnerable triumvir composed of his three arch-enemies and fused into one being after the manner of *Siamese twins*. A second episode flashed on to the screen of his imagination—that of a darkened room, a bed and *The Lizard*, his mask rendered oddly luminous, bending over him with a knife. He saw him stretch out his other hand and touch him, felt the fingers pressing into his flesh so vividly that he woke. . . .

“It’s all right, sir,” said a voice in his ear. “It’s only me—Hodges, you know.”

Dighton blinked desperately and slid his feet to the floor of the compartment.

“Hullo!” he yawned. “You, is it?—What’s the trouble?”

The chauffeur thrust forward an envelope and Dighton took it.

“Came just after you left, sir. Jarrett found it in the hall. Sir Ian was out, but I thought I’d better bring it along to you.”

Dighton dropped it on to the seat beside him and felt in his pocket.

“That’s quite all right, sir,” pursued Hodges,

retreating to the platform. "You was a good officer, sir—never knew a better. Glad to be able to do you a turn."

He glanced behind him.

"You're almost due off, sir—and Miss Haye wants to speak to you."

Dighton came to his senses with a jerk.

Greta! At this time of night! He had caught a glimpse of her in the flat that morning—nothing more. But he had hardly expected this.

She swept past the chauffeur—an impulsive bundle of furs and silk and scent—and a parcel of things shot from her arms on to the cushions: Magazines, tobacco, cigarettes of the sort he had declared did not touch his throat, and chocolate.

"Alan," she whispered delightedly, seizing both his hands, "I just had to come. Uncle was called away just in time—and then that letter came. Wasn't it providential?"

Dighton rubbed his chin.

"I say," he gasped, "it's awfully good of you—and all that; but won't there be a row?"

"I don't care if there is. I couldn't bear to think of you going away for goodness knows how long without saying good-bye—Come back soon."

"I'll do my best, dear."

She gazed dreamily at the light.

"I shall never forget last night for as long as I live. Oh, it didn't begin at the *Cockatoo Club*, my dear, but long before that, before you saw me almost.

The moment I noticed you at *Donati's* something inside me went *click!* Then a little devil began to work. All the time I was sitting in Lady Turnham's box I kept thinking of you.—Aren't you feeling frightfully conceited?"

"I'm feeling frightfully proud."

She withdrew her hand and clasped them behind her.

"And now you're going away from me—and I shall never want to dance again."

"Oh, yes, you will."

She shook her head.

"Good-bye, old thing. If ever you get to Rome, look in and see daddy. I'm going out to him for a month in the spring. And write to me every day."

He reached for her arms and drew her closer.

"Listen, Greta: I shall write you a long budget once a week: I can't promise more. You've got to trust me tremendously, even when the promised letters fail to show up. I've known girls—scores of 'em, but none of them has ever appealed to me like you."

For the second time in his life he kissed her lips.

Presently he held her away from him, looking at her hungrily.

"You're wonderful," he muttered, "and I don't deserve you! But I'll never let you down, little woman; you can stake your life on that."

She drew the glove from her left hand and moved the emerald ring to her engagement finger, just as the

whistle blew. The train was moving when Dighton handed her out to Hodges who, with his accustomed discretion, had only reminded them of his presence when he was wanted.

“Good-bye, dear, and good luck!”

The flutter of a handkerchief, platform, station familiar advertisement-signs all slipping away into a November night, pathetic little groups turning away to retrace their steps to the barrier . . . porters, newsboys, distributors of pillows and refreshments preparing to go home. . . .

Dighton drew in his head and picked up the envelope.

The address was typewritten—*Alan Dighton, Esq.*, in capitals, and the remainder in normal type. There was something bulky inside—something, in all probability, that he had left in the office and the caretaker had found. And yet, he remembered, he had never mentioned the flat in Park Lane.

He slit the top with his finger and jumped back as if he had been struck.

There fell on to his palm a circular disc of jade-green bone, an inch and a half or so in diameter, with the head of a lizard impressed in gold on the side that was uppermost!

There was no letter in the envelope—just that.

He tore the paper into little strips and allowed them to flutter to the floor at his feet. Suddenly he threw back his head and laughed aloud.

The Lizard had sent him his card—the sign and superscription of the best-informed scoundrel in Europe! He intended Dighton to know that his identity was discovered, and that the events of the previous night were not forgotten.

The adventurer unbuttoned his jacket and thrust the disc into a waistcoat pocket.

It was a challenge, of course—a challenge to mortal combat and, as such, Dighton accepted it.

The game had begun—and he was in it, up to his neck! He had been surprised at the appearance of the token, but it did not disturb him unduly. It would be a struggle to the bitter end—a sort of perilous obstacle-race, with Greta standing at the winning-post.

Remembering her as he had last seen her, he thought it was worth it—every bit!

Chapter IX

THE boat-train from Havre steamed into the *Gare St. Lazare* at noon.

Dighton pushed his bags through the window to a blue-coated porter, secured a taxi and drove to a small hotel he knew in the Rue Daunou.

Paris had changed little since he had last seen it. The shops, the corner restaurants with their regiments of chairs, the eternal traffic jam, all seemed exactly as he had left it three years before. The air was keen, in spite of a brief spell of wintry sunshine. The crowds that thronged the streets looked cold. He caught visions of bearded business men, blue-nosed and muffled in their heavy overcoats, smart women shivering in their furs, hatless working-class women with chapped hands and shining, shawl-bewrapped faces.

Winter and summer alike, Dighton liked Paris, geographically so close to London—and temperamentally so different. People had their characters written more accurately on their faces than in England. They were cold—and they showed it. If they had been sweltering in the heat of mid-July they would have expressed their discomfiture just as eloquently. Anglo-Saxon reserve was a quality they could neither fathom nor emulate.

He lunched in a bright restaurant in the *Boulevard des Capucines*, remarkable for its white paint, its

vast plate-glass windows and the excellence of its *cuisine*.

A visit to Messieurs Charvoz, Rue de la Paix, with Daudot's hat proved more enlightening than he had hoped. The manager knew Monsieur Daudot well. He had been a customer of their's for years. If Monsieur desired, they would cheerfully take charge of the hat and dispatch it to their client themselves.

Dighton thanked him, but declined the offer. He wanted something tangible to explain his visit to Daudot's flat.

The manager accompanied him to the door, smiling affably and rubbing his hands together.

Know Monsieur Daudot! Up to his retirement from the *Sûreté*, he had been a constant visitor. He came now, of course, but not so frequently. "A man of his word, Monsieur. Feared by his enemies and respected by his friends." He recollected the night of his accident—the accident that had lamed him—as if it had been yesterday.

"A round-up of some bad characters in Montmartre, you will understand, Monsieur. The most desperate took to the roof-tops—and Daudot, hot upon his heels, slipped and fell."

The little, plump hatter's manager, with soft pointed beard and flowing cravat, shook his head and sighed.

"One does not encounter such men nowadays, Monsieur. Efficient, perhaps; but with the charms of Emile Daudot, never! You will find his apartment

in the Rue Albert Cloquet, close to the Porte St. Ouen. Number 7, Monsieur, *deuzieme étage.*”

Dighton thanked him again. He did not stop to explain to the shopman that the address he had just given him was totally different from the one written down in his note-book. He did not suppose it would interest him.

Strolling towards the *Metro* station in the Place de la Concorde, he turned the thing over in his mind, trying to decide which address he should go to first. It struck him as odd that a retired detective, living presumably on a modest pension, should possess two distinct addresses. There was the possibility that he had moved quite recently from one to the other—to the address Corlitt knew from the one given him by the Frenchman, seeing that Taverner's late secretary had called on him in Paris only a matter of days before. In which case, it was rather extraordinary that this change of habitat had not drifted to the ears of the man who professed to know him so well.

The possibility of two addresses intrigued Dighton vastly. It suggested a double existence, it made his theory regarding Daudot and *The Lizard* all the more feasible. The apartment in the Rue Albert Cloquet, he argued, would be where he normally resided, together with Madame perhaps and a growing family. The address near the Porte Maillot, familiar to Corlitt and Taverner, would be where business might be conducted which did not fit in with his late profession. Conveying his experience of *Ahlenite* and its inventor

to the British Secret Service would come under this heading.

Supposing that his theory held water, a visit to the Porte Maillot address might entail very serious risks for, although Daudot, the man with the limp, had never set eyes on him, his supposed other half would know him in an instant. There still remained the sporting chance, however, that Taverner was right and Dighton did not relish the notion of being taken into the bosom of Daudot's family. The respectable side of his existence failed to thrill him one iota.

Descending the steps of the underground railway, he booked to *Étoile*, as being closer to the street he wanted than Porte Maillot itself.

Returning to the daylight once more, he found the Rue des Acacias and presently the pretentious block of flats in which Corlitt and Daudot had conversed so often.

The *concierge*, encouraged by a fifty-franc note, wiped large hands on a green baize apron and gave his views on the tenant of the third-floor flat without reserve.

A man like Monsieur Daudot might keep certain affairs from the ears of his wife, but from the world, no. To change his name would be an absurdity. *La petite* upstairs was pretty. He would not deny that for one moment. But extravagant! He raised his eyes to the ceiling. Monsieur was often at his wits end to know which way to turn to satisfy her.

"One needs to be a millionaire nowadays, Monsieur," he declared, "to indulge in such luxuries."

Dighton cleared his throat. The mystery of the two addresses was solved already. In searching for the lair of a bandit, he had found only the home of Daudot's mistress.

"Monsieur is away, I understand?"

The *concierge* shrugged his shoulders.

"He has not been here for some days, Monsieur. Mademoiselle Laroche is in, however."

"I'll see her," decided Dighton—and went up.

His knock brought footsteps hurrying along the passage on the far side of the door and presently a woman's voice spoke to him through the brass *grille*.

"Who is it?"

"A friend of Monsieur Daudot."

A pause—and the door opened about a foot, revealing a section of polished parquet, a brightly dis-tempered wall and the head and shoulders of a girl.

She eyed him suspiciously, fearfully.

"Who are you, Monsieur?" she demanded hoarsely "and what is your business with Monsieur Daudot?"

Dighton pursed up his lips.

"I wish to see him on a private matter—one, however, which is of the utmost importance."

"M. Daudot does not live here."

"Quite so; but I understood that he might be found at this address."

He glanced down at his gloved hands.

"Has he returned from his visit to England?"

Her hands shot to her hair and she shrank, moaning, against the far wall.

"*Ah! Mon Dieu!* Now I understand! I warned him to have nothing to do with it—and see now what has happened! You are of the police, m'sieur?"

She had become suddenly very calm.

"Well, not exactly——"

She threw open the door to its fullest extent and directed him to a small room, furnished more with regard to elegance than comfort.

"Sit down, M'sieur," she said brokenly. "I told him how it would be, but he would not listen. 'I will sell them in England,' he declared; 'in France it is too dangerous.' He told me he had been there often before—and knew what to do. That was on Tuesday. He had one other appointment—politics or something of that kind—and he was to have returned the same night to France. And now you have got him, *hein?* I am sorry—very sorry."

Dighton, staring through the French windows to the little balcony beyond, was engaged in a desperate struggle to retain his composure. This little dark-eyed woman, with her painted lips and fashionable clothes, had been nursing some secret ever since M. Daudot's departure. It had preyed on her nerves. Deceived by Dighton's height and build and his mention of that journey, she had resorted to confession, probably to clear herself of any suspicion of complicity.

In what——? What was too dangerous for an ex-detective to sell in his own country? What was this other axe Daudot had had to grind in London?

He racked his brain.

Daylight began to filter in: The two addresses . . . the concierge's story of Mdlle. Laroche's extravagance . . . Daudot had been at his wits end to keep up these two establishments. It was an old story, typical of the life of the French metropolis. Versed in crime from the one side, he had crossed to the other to meet his liabilities. He had stolen something of value—jewels probably . . .

He unwrapped the hat and held it so that she could see the initials inside.

"You recognise this?"

"Parfaitement, Monsieur."

She sat on the edge of a great carved chair with unholstery of silk brocade—a sad, wan-looking figure, appearing more painted still now that the natural colouring that formed a background to the artificial had faded.

"Can you tell me any reason why he should have stolen these—er—things?"

The corners of her mouth drooped into a smile full of irony.

"He stole the pearls, M'sieur, to cover his losses at gambling. That is the whole truth. He will tell you that I was the cause of his ruin. He has always pretended that I was extravagant. That is false, M'sieur, absolutely false. I——"

Dighton checked her with a movement of his fingers.

"Mademoiselle Laroche," he said quietly. "I am here to discover all I can in favour of your friend.

Monsieur Daudot has had a distinguished record, and we are disposed to believe that he was not alone in this crime—that it was prompted by someone else——”

There came a sound from the passage outside, the noise of a key being inserted in a lock and a door shuddering open.

The girl was on her feet now, trembling violently.

“It is he, M’sieur! the man of whom you spoke! If he finds you here he will kill you.”

Crossing the room swiftly, she threw open a door and pointed into the darkened apartment beyond.

“Go in there, M’sieur,” she whispered. “Hide behind the curtain, behind the bed—anywhere.

. . . ”

Dighton hesitated a moment and then obeyed.

Unless it was *The Lizard* he was not interested. He wanted to be sure of his quarry first.

Mechanically he eased the automatic in his hip-pocket and slipped to the hinge-side of the door.

There ensued a long silence and then a man’s voice, speaking in French, that he could not determine whether he had heard before or not. He caught quick, jerky sentences, accusations apparently, for the girl’s shrill denials were clearly audible.

And then, for the second time in his existence, he heard the violent, hissing report of Ahlborg’s *Pocket Death!*

Chapter X

HIS brain was working very quickly now.

The Lizard and Emile Daudot were two distinct entities. Daudot driven to desperation by the fruits of his own extravagance had become the tool of the masked assassin, had engaged in some gigantic robbery and gone to London to dispose of the spoil.

Hearing of his intended visit to Taverner, *The Lizard* had suspected a scheme to double-cross him. Somewhere between Paris and London Daudot had met his death, then Corlitt, who had been a visitor to the Rue des Acacias, and now this Laroche woman. He had many motives for removing Corlitt and it was possible Daudot's mistress knew too much.

He waited for some seconds for that door to open, waited with his finger on the trigger and every muscle in his body tense.

A revolver shot would disturb the entire building, bring the *concierge* flying up the outer stairs, send a score of shrieking tenants to their windows, but Dighton had no intention of holding his hand for that. He knew only too well the temper of the man he had to deal with, and the value of getting his round in first.

Still keeping his eye on the door, he stepped backward across the room and threw open the French

windows. They opened on to the same balcony as those of the next room, overlooking the main thoroughfare. His action gave a second point by which he might be attacked, but the fumes that filtered in through every crack had to be dispersed by the first means available.

In a little while his hiding-place was wrapped in a blue mist . . . pungent . . . asphyxiating. Driven to the outer air, he hazarded a glance in at the next window. His first attempt, screened by looped curtains and volumes of tinted vapour, revealed little. A second look assured him that he had witnessed a repetition of the Park Lane tragedy and that, save for the prone figure of Mdlle. Laroche, the room was empty.

Something attracted his attention to the street. A figure was in the act of leaving the building—a dapper man in a grey hat and dark, belted coat. He glanced upwards as Dighton peered over, so swiftly that the adventurer felt that he must have seen him. Crossing the road, he made off in the direction of the Avenue de la Grande Armée.

Dighton fought his way back to the bedroom, dipped a towel in the water-jug and tied it over his face. A minute later he had invaded the death-chamber by the inner door and staggered, smarting, into the passage.

He left the towel inside and let himself noiselessly out.

On the first-floor landing he encountered the

concierge, casting his eyes around him and sniffing suspiciously.

"A strange smell, M'sieur," he complained. "Like chemicals."

Dighton, itching to get away from him, sniffed too.

"Something passing in a cart outside," he suggested. "It would go up these stairs like a flue."

Leaving the other still pondering over this possible solution of a mystery, he hurried into the road. His quarry was no longer in sight. He followed the trail into the Avenue, strained his eyes seeking for the grey hat in the crowds that thronged the pavements and gave up hope altogether at the *Étoile* station.

The thing that was uppermost in his mind as he reached his hotel was the importance of leaving Paris as soon as possible. He had left the *concierge* hot on the track of those fumes. From his brief conversation with the fellow in the hall he had adjudged him a prying busybody, ready to jump to a conclusion at the least suspicion. If the police were not already in Mdlle. Laroche's flat, the discovery of the crime was only a matter of hours. Late editions of the evening papers would have it in glaring headlines, together with descriptions of himself and the other visitor.

Barring Daudot's hat, he had left nothing incriminating in the apartment. He made a kind of hasty inventory to assure himself that this was so. The paper with which he had wrapped the hat was a plain piece taken from Taverner's study.

The memory of his interview with the hatter's manager was rather unsettling. He would read of the tragedy in the papers and remember——

Dighton breathed again.

He had given him the other address—the address of Daudot's home. It would never occur to him that he knew of the ex-detective's *liaison* with the dead girl. The police would soon discover—even if they were ignorant already—that the rent was paid by Daudot. The presence of a hat with his initials would not suggest anything.

Dighton packed the hat and coat he had worn and substituted a cap and Burberry. It was not until he glanced in the mirror over his dressing-table that he noticed that his hands and forehead were tinged a delicate shade of blue!

In the little office on the first floor he found a railway time-table. The *De Luxe* train was due to depart at 5.10. Glancing at his watch, he discovered he had barely twenty-five minutes to reach the *Gare de Lyon*. In a little more than twelve hours he would be across the frontier. He decided to bolt for it.

The crowd at the booking-office seemed endless. He looked at his watch a dozen times before he reached the *guichet* and bought a first-class ticket, with supplement, from a leisurely booking-office clerk.

It was the porter, however, who caught him that train. A little sturdy fellow, blue-smocked and numbered, with pieces of baggage hooked all over

him which he applied to the crowd by the barrier after the manner of a battering-ram. Five minutes later Dighton, gulping for breath, was standing in the corridor of a swiftly-moving train, surrounded by suit-cases that had been pushed on somehow. Blue-smock had trotted him from one end of the platform to the other to achieve this miracle, not omitting at the very limit of the course to shout his thanks for the handsome tip that had been passed to him in a kind of farewell handshake.

"*Bon voyage, M'sieur!*" he had yelled and the smile which accompanied this utterance was expansive.

A sleeping-car attendant, suddenly aware of the Englishman's presence, bore down upon the scattered pieces and consulted Dighton's ticket.

"*Turin, M'sieur!*"

"That's right," agreed the traveller; "Turin."

There were not many people travelling, and Dighton had a two-berth compartment to himself. He removed his waterproof and sat down. Rinsing his hands ten minutes later, he discovered that the colouring had provoked a myriad of tiny blisters which, encouraged by the application of warm water, set up an itching sensation that was the reverse of pleasant. An exactly similar rash showed on his forehead, most of which was hidden fortunately by his hair.

He returned to his seat and dug out one of the magazines Greta had given him. But he did not read. He was gazing out of the window at Paris, with night

creeping over it; Paris, like a ghost-city wreathed in haze. The strings of lights that indicated the thoroughfares hung like fairy things, apparently suspended from nothing. They were rattling through the suburbs presently and the gloom had deepened.

He wondered whether the sheets the newsboys carried bore scare head-lines, whether hoarse voices were shouting "*Horrible murder at Porte Maillot!*" He could picture the *concierge* of the house in the Rue des Acacias standing in the road, wild-eyed and unshaven, voicing the gruesome details of his discovery for the benefit of his friends. They would be looking for a tall Englishman and a little man in a blue, belted coat and grey velour hat.

The attendant glanced in at the doorway to announce that dinner would be served in the dining-car at seven. Dighton accepted a slip of pink paper and pushed it away into a waistcoat pocket.

He turned the pages of the magazine idly.

He would report to Taverner from Turin.

It would be news to him to learn that Daudot and *The Lizard* were accomplices. Turning over the whole adventure in cold blood, Dighton could not see that he had achieved much. He was satisfied that the ex-detective was dead, although he could not produce proof even of this. He had established that *The Lizard's* agents might be found in the most unexpected places and occupations—and that the gang existed for the purpose of loot. His report would assure his chief that he had not been idle, and that

he arch-bandit's weapon carried only three remaining charges.

His memory jerked back to Mdlle. Laroche, the little, painted brunette who had been so frightened when he called. Her end was as tragic as his own might have been—if *The Lizard* had realised that he was there. He was sorry for Mdlle. Laroche.

A sudden sound aroused him from his reverie—the noise of a newspaper being opened, coming from somewhere almost at his elbow.

Turning his head sharply, he was astonished to see Marney—his acquaintance of the *Cockatoo Club*—chewing a black cigar and occupying the other corner-seat.

A flash of gold-filled teeth deputed for a smile.

“Wa’ll, stranger!” drawled Marney, staring dreamy-eyed through the window; “I guess it’s blowing up for snow.”

Chapter XI

"LORD!" exclaimed Dighton. "How the blazes did you get here?"

Marney yawned.

"Same way as yourself—only a trifle earlier. I'm not in the habit of cutting things quite so fine."

He thrust a cigar-case across at Dighton—a sort of pocket-book and case combined—in which foreign paper money, stamps and newspaper-cuttings hid all but the tips of five desperate-looking cigars of the brand known in Italy as *Toscano*.

The other declined with thanks.

"Awfully good of you, but I prefer a pipe."

Marney grunted and tucked the receptacle out of sight.

"So you were in a hurry to quit the gay city, eh?"

Dighton started.

For some reason or other, looking at Marney, a picture floated across his mind of ravens he had seen hopping around the site where the executioner's block had stood at the Tower. His expression implied that he knew more than the other thought.

"What do you know, Marney?"

"I know you were in a hell of a hurry. Another guy standing by me at the window wanted to take bets with me that you'd miss it. You can say what

you like here in a reasonable kind of voice, by the way. I've been the whole length of the train and there's not a soul on it that matters."

He spat out a piece of chewed leaf.

"The feller with money to throw about was a wool-buyer from Yorkshire. There's an Italian senator and his secretary, back from some convention, or other, a couple of *vamps* out to see what they can pick up at Bordighera or San Remo and a fair proportion of stand-alooof English folk looking for the sun. What have you been doing to your hands?"

He shot out the question so quickly that his companion jumped.

"That?—oh that's the breath of our friend with the green monocle."

He lowered his voice.

"He came into Daudot's flat while I was there and wiped out a Frenchwoman."

Marney whistled softly.

"And you're alive to tell the tale!"

Dighton laughed.

"I'm alive right enough—and still kicking. She'd pushed me into another room. I hadn't the least idea who was coming, mind you. I suspected it might be our friend, but I wasn't sure. I was standing on the other side of the door when he blazed off. A little later I caught sight of him from the balcony——"

Marney moved his head slowly up and down.

"And he never knew you were there! Holy Mike! but isn't that just wonderful!"

"It was getting out after him," pursued the other, "that I picked up this rash. I'd tied a towel round my face, but I hadn't thought about my hands."

The American gazed at him for some moments in silence.

"Some people," he asserted, "are born under a lucky star. It's no credit to 'em—no credit whatever. They just can't help themselves. Others—take Langley, for example—receive a visit from the guy in the white mask only once—and they don't survive five minutes to tell you their impressions! You packed your grips then and beat it, eh?"

"You bet I did. I'd done all I had to do in Paris, and had no desire to be arrested by the French police on the strength of the testimony of a *concierge*. This thing 'll be in all the papers in a couple of shakes."

Marney shook his head.

"You can make your mind easy on that score, old scout. Certain people 'll be bribed to keep their mouths shut—or spirited away if a bribe doesn't do it. Ahlborg's new dope's too rich a mixture for a machine like the French public, or any other public, for the matter of that. They'll be looking out for the man with that gun, sure enough, but there'll be no publicity about it."

"Then you think——"

"I think you were right in shifting your quarters—dead right. You're paid to take risks, but not unnecessary ones."

He reached up and pressed the bell.

"I don't know how you feel," he continued, "but I'd like to drink the health of a feller who's encountered *The Lizard* twice in—how long is it?"

Dighton made a rapid calculation.

"About forty-three hours, as near as I can make it."

The figure astonished himself. So much had happened since Corlitt's call at his office with a proposition that he could have sworn he had been indulging in underground warfare for at least a week.

"If you'll take my advice," said the older man when the drinks were brought, "you won't go out for trouble. You won't get grouching because a week slips by without anything in particular happening. You'll just thank those lucky stars I was talking about just now. If you do strike a dull week—the next'll be a cracker-jack!"

He raised his glass.

"Well, here's how!"

"Cheerio!" murmured Dighton.

He was beginning to like Marney. It was growing upon him every minute that, somewhere beneath that horny, case-hardened exterior, there lurked a heart of gold—more than that, a sense of humour to which it's possessor refused for some reason to give expression.

"Daudot was in with the other chap," he announced presently. "I found out that much. One of his

reasons for crossing the Channel was to get rid of a rope of pearls they'd stolen."

Marney frowned.

"My!" he muttered half to himself, "that's interesting!"

His cigar had gone out, and he lit it from the flame of a battered brass pocket-lighter.

"Why didn't he wait to see the Chief," he broke out suddenly. "Did you find out that?"

"Because," said Dighton, "he happens to be dead!"

The other screwed his paper into a ball and tossed it into the opposite corner. He pulled down the blind over the door on the corridor side and faced Dighton, both hands resting on his knees.

"Who killed him?"

"*The Lizard* I suppose."

"What for?"

"Because he heard he was going to Taverner."

Marney extended one hand, palm uppermost, to an invisible audience.

"Gee! What d'you know about that?" he demanded. "All from the mouths of babes and sucklings! Can you beat it!"

Dighton burst out laughing.

"What's the idea, Marney?"

"Idea!" echoed the other. "Why it comes out *pat*—like dropping nickels into a peanut machine! D'you happen to have made any more of these sensational discoveries?"

The other smiled and shook his head.

"I'm afraid that's about all—except perhaps that *The Lizard* was wearing the same grey hat and blue trench-coat as I saw in London. I was too high up to get a look at his face."

Marney leaned back in his seat and crossed his legs.

"D'you know what I think, young feller? In my opinion that guy's an ex-employee of some diplomatic service or other, gone wrong. You see, Dighton, he knows too much for a mere outsider. He knew the secret of Taverner's stairs, for example. That looks queer, don't it? The odd thing is that he should have been counting on Daudot for one business when the Chief was negotiating with him for another."

"How long has he been at the game?" asked Dighton.

The other slapped his thigh.

"A matter of weeks, that's all, as far as I can figure it out. The vultures were just gathering around Ahlborg's outfit, seeing which of 'em could peck out his brains first, when *The Lizard* sailed like a streak of blue lightning over the horizon and threw in a few unwelcome complications."

Dighton wrinkled his forehead.

"He's out for the *Pocket Death*, like the rest of us."

"Yep!" snapped Marney; that's a dead certainty. It's equally evident that he's out for loot. I've suspected it before—and the story of the pearls corroborates it."

"The question is," declared Dighton; "is he trying to secure Ahlborg's invention for some other Power—or for himself? Is he a secret agent, with a profitable side-line,—or is his interest in the *Pocket Death* purely personal? It has been extraordinarily useful to him up to date, you must remember."

"The value of this new dope," said the American, "is that it's more or less silent, and that it reduces its victims to powder within a reasonably short space of time. If it could be altered so's to leave out that blue stain it'd be more valuable still. In ordinary warfare the colour business is of little consequence; but from the point of view of a crook, wanting to cover up his tracks, it matters a whole lot.—I don't mind betting you Ahlborg's concentrating on that defect now."

Dighton reflected.

It was evident that his companion preferred discussing the merits and demerits of the explosive, rather than committing himself to an opinion on the questions raised.

"He's firing the stuff off pretty recklessly," he announced after a long silence. "Covering up tracks may be of vital importance to him at the moment, but, from our point of view, he's been recklessly extravagant with charges that are practically impossible to replace.—Unless, of course, he is confident of replacing them."

The other glanced round.

"How d'you mean?"

"He may have entered into some agreement for the purchase of the stuff already," returned Dighton. "It's unlikely, I grant you, but at this juncture all sorts of unlikely things are liable to happen. There's still another way of looking at it: If *The Lizard's* the crook we imagine him to be, he may be putting his services at anybody's disposal—providing the price is big enough."

"In which case——?" queried Marney, dropping the end of his *Toscano* and crushing it under his heel.

"In which case Ahlborg may be paying him to get that gun back!"

"Stranger!" said the other with a look of undisguised admiration, "you've a lot of sound common-sense in that big head of yours. It's a whole education to listen to you!"

His gaze followed the progress, just visible through a kink in the blind, of a dining-car attendant with a noisy bell.

"Food for reflection's all very well in its way," he concluded, "but it's no use to an empty stomach! How does the notion of a square meal strike you?"

Dighton grinned.

"Uncommonly well. I haven't had a bite since lunch."

They passed out into the corridor and embarked on a swaying, uncomfortable journey, following upon the heels of a thin line of fellow-travellers, similarly bound.

Chapter XII

MUTE understanding between Marney and the chief dining-car attendant procured for them a corner table, to which drifted the wool-buyer from Yorkshire and one of Marney's *vamps* bound for the Italian Riviera.

The lady in question proved to be a dazzling blonde, though whether by nature or choice Dighton was not quite decided. By way of passing the time, and in want of something better upon which to lavish her charms, she had attached herself quite early in the journey to the broad-spoken Mr. Blythe. That the attachment was of purely a temporary nature was evident from the restless movement of her eyes and her quite open attempts to interest the two men opposite.

A gentle pressure of her foot on Marney's shoe produced a protest that was as unexpected as it was blunt.

"Baby," drawled the American, "I'm an old-timer—and I suffer from corns! You can try the friend on my right if you like. He may not have corns, but he's no fool!"

The woman to whom this remark was addressed was by no means disconcerted.

"Did I touch you?" she inquired in all innocence. "Really I had no idea. These tables are so small, you know."

She spoke in English, with a pronounced accent that was not without its charm.

"So you are an American, M'sieur?"

"You've said it!" returned Marney and relapsed into silence.

Baulked in her first attack on a man who, judged by his gold teeth if by nothing else appeared to be a person of substance, Mdlle. Rollin fell back upon her first hope. Picking up the little half-bottles of wine one by one she screwed up her lips at the labels.

"You do not want to drink this cheap stuff, eh, *cheri*?"

Blythe shrugged his shoulders.

"What d'you want me to buy?—champagne?"

"Why, certainly. Why not?"

There being no answer to this riddle, the Yorkshireman hailed the wine-steward.

"What about you, sir?" he shot at Marney.

"Cognac's my liquor," came the response, "and I never touch *bubbly*."

The other turned to Dighton.

"Mine's *pommard*, thanks all the same."

Mdlle, Rollin concentrated a two-gun battery of singularly effective eyes upon her immediate *vis-a-vis*.

"Don't you like champagne either? You do not know what is good for you, M'sieur. *Pommard* for lunch perhaps, but in the evening——"

She broke off to signify her approval of the brand the attendant was recommending. Without doubt, there was mute understanding here, too!

The express made a brief halt at a station—the only stop before Dijon. Marney consulted his watch—a large gun-metal chronometer secured by a leather guard that looked suspiciously like a converted boot-lace.

“She’s up to time,” he said to Dighton. “Don’t suppose they’ll take many on here.”

The other, rather to avoid watching the effect of Mdlle. Rollin and champagne combined upon the susceptible Yorkshireman than for any other reason, was staring at the vista which began at the backs of these two and extended to the far end of the compartment. A double row of small tables, each with its separate shaded lamp; bearded Frenchmen with an abundance of protruding shirt-cuff, blond, self-conscious Englishmen, a noticeable majority of women of the same race, a German or two and a modest sprinkling of Italians. He had located Mdlle. Rollin’s companion—plumper and a trifle shorter in height—attaching herself limpet-like to one of these latter. The object of her attentions was plying one of the tooth-picks supplied in little transparent paper envelopes in a manner that suggested that the encounter with this bird of passage had not thrilled him. Nor had he sprung a bottle of champagne.

Marney had his things moved into Dighton’s compartment after dinner.

“Birds of a feather are supposed to flock together,” he reminded the younger man when the transfer of baggage had been completed, “but folks

in our line of business don't often get the chance. In a general manner of speaking, far from flocking together they avoid one another like the plague. It behoves us therefore to make the most of an opportunity such as this. No use offering you a cigar, I suppose?"

"No," said Dighton. "I'm as strict about my smokes as you are about drinks."

And they left it at that.

They tossed for berths, and Dighton lost, Marney choosing the lower bunk.

"You've got to keep your eyes skinned for women of Mdle, Rollin's type," he said as they undressed. "They meet too many people, and you never know who they've met last.—Collar-studs, by the way, are problems in this sort of travelling. I usually stow mine in a trousers pocket."

He had a queer way of uttering his thoughts as they came to him, without the least attempt at relevancy.

"I don't know what sort of figure Blythe cuts in the wool trade," he pursued, "but it don't take a sleuth to reveal that he's an almighty fool where women are concerned. Sympathy's a wrong line with girls of the Rollin persuasion: They don't want it and they don't deserve it. The Continentals know how to deal with them far better than ourselves. Take that Italian guy. The way he handled his girl made Blythe look like a baby! Blythe'll be showing her family portraits by the morning and telling her

all about his mother in Bradford! You see my point, don't you, Dighton?"

The other nodded.

"You mean that *The Lizard* will have one or two of these ladies on the look-out for information."

"You've said it."

Perched on the edge of his bunk, in a suit of faded pink pyjamas, he looked thinner than ever.

"You'll have to rub shoulders with all sorts and conditions—and you can't keep your mouth too shut. I've opened mine a deal more than I meant to to-night, but it's rare than I find myself in company that suits me. Say when you're ready and I'll turn out the light."

Dighton had scaled the steps provided and had sprawled into a comfortable position between the sheets.

"When do they blow in for the passports?"

"Somewhere around six. No need to turn out, Are you fixed?"

"Yes. Switch her off. Er—good night, Marney."

"Night-night," croaked the little man from below—and the light went out.

Dighton slept for four and a half hours right off the reel. It was still dark when he awoke. The express was in a station—he read *Aix-les-Bains* on a lamp.

In spite of the heated compartment, he realised that it was colder outside, considerably colder than it had been in Paris. At the next waking-point—*St. Jean de Maurienne*—piled heaps of snow showed in

ghostly whiteness against the darkness. He saw it on the roofs of coaches as they slipped past the windows.

He dozed off to the notes of a *sous-chef's* trumpet signalling them out—and the next thing he knew was a frozen mountain that made the bed-clothes feel like paper and a polite Italian performing his customary duties at the frontier station.

It was quite light now and they were two hours late.

"Your passport, *Signore*?"

He dived his hand in a pocket and produced the required document.

The official thanked him and passed on. Customs officers followed, asking questions and flourishing little pieces of coloured chalk. The door had barely closed when it slid open again to admit a stout French *commissaire*, with bristling moustaches and an aggressive stare.

Somehow Dighton suspected that his visit had to do with the tragedy in the Rue des Acacias.

He asked for his passport again and examined it from cover to cover.

"You have come straight from England, M'sieur?"

"*Oui, M'sieur.*"

Dighton knew what he was looking for—the stamp of the port of disembarkation—the purple impression that showed when he had landed at Havre.

"You did not stop in Paris?"

"*Non, M'sieur.*"

The other closed the passport and observed Dighton for some moments, with his hands clasped behind him.

"You are travelling for business or for pleasure?"

"Oh, pleasure," returned Dighton and smiled.

"*Bien, M'sieur!*"

The document was in his hand again and the door had closed behind the visitor.

"Phew!" murmured Marney from the lower berth. "That was a narrow shave, young feller! If you'd waited till to-morrow it'd have been all UP. It was the date that saved you there!"

Dighton was glad when the wait was over, when they were equipped with electric locomotives fore and aft and speeding up the curved incline towards Mont. Cenis. It was not until they were through the tunnel that he breathed again. The shabby snow-roofed French buildings had given place to gaily distempered houses, with square fronts and painted frescoes. Beyond the natural barrier of the mountains even the landscape had altered. Little soldiers in grey-green capes came into view, peasants drably picturesque and middle-class men wrapped in their cloaks like mediæval conspirators.

He read *Bardonecchia* in big letters of dull red. They were in Italy.

PART II

Chapter XIII

MARNEY left the train at Turin.

"Well, so long, young feller," were his parting words to Dighton. "I'm dropping off here and making my way down later. That's one of the disadvantages of being a notoriety. You can go right ahead. Make your headquarters at *The Casino*. It's the smartest hotel in Rappallo and Ahlborg entertains there often."

He lowered his voice to a whisper.

"Try and cultivate an acquaintance with Mafalda Pasquali. If Ahlborg has a weakness—she's it. There's no mistake about it, Dighton, a guy who can dance as you did at the *Cockatoo Club* can go a long way with the ladies, if he plays his cards properly."

Dighton flushed.

This extraordinary little man, with his wealth of gold teeth and habitually serious expression, overlooked nothing. He wondered how much he had guessed of the lightning love-affair between himself and Greta Haye.

Marney handed over his luggage to an Italian porter and hovered for a few moments in the doorway of the compartment.

"Women have broken bigger men than Ahlborg," he announced in that rasping voice of his. "If you

can fox-trot your way through the gates of the *Villa Sabino*, so much the better. Don't kid yourself you can dope the dogs; it's been tried and it didn't come off. Langley dug-out an old stable-hand who knew 'em and paid him heavily to keep 'em interested while he pulled off his *coup*."

He stared dreamily at the roof and the stump of his cigar travelled from one end of his mouth to the other.

"They buried the stable-hand three days after Langley quit. Suicide they called it; but I wouldn't say it was that myself."

A warning shriek from the engine and Marney held out his hand.

"So-long again, Dighton. Come and see me when you feel like it. You know where."

He swung briskly off the moving train on to the platform, thrust his hands deep into his overcoat pockets and followed his porter towards the barrier.

Leaning out of the window, Dighton watched him out of sight. A queer sense of loneliness assailed him as he returned to his corner. He had enjoyed that trip from Paris more particularly because Marney had been there. His going acted as a reminder that he was doomed to a lone game in every sense of the word.

Somewhere between Turin and Alessandria it struck Dighton that Marney had deliberately planned that meeting. In spite of the other's assertion, he was not satisfied in his mind that he was on the

train when he had made his last minute bolt for it. It was quite within the bounds of possibility that Taverner had instructed the American to watch him in Paris. By discovering how he handled the Daudot business *en route* he would have been able to form an opinion how his new recruit shaped.

Partly convinced that this was so, he felt no resentment either towards Marney or his chief. The espionage system that Taverner controlled was so intricate and so vitally interdependent that it behoved him to assure himself as to the strength and importance of every mesh. Marney's conversation, disjointed as it had been, had contained much that was instructive. He had warned him against certain dangers and, without appearing to do so, had outlined the policy his colleague was to follow.

Up to a point it was a pleasant one.

His pose was that of an English tourist wintering in the best hotel in Rapallo. He was to enter wholeheartedly into the amusements provided, make himself popular with his fellow-guests, endeavour to attract the attention of the one woman who might prove useful and, to employ Marney's expression, fox-trot his way through the gates of the *Villa Sabino*.

One train of thought set another in motion. He thought he was beginning to see the method in Taverner's madness when, even in the face of a tragedy at his own flat, he had persisted in dragging Dighton and his niece to a night-club.

It had been all part and parcel of a deeply-laid scheme. Corlitt's visit to his office had been part of it too. The secretary had admitted that Dighton's letter asking for a job had been providential. They had wanted a man who was unknown, he had declared. Dighton believed he could add to that. In an age when the craze for dancing was world-wide, they were seeking a man of average good looks and social attainments, who might take advantage of the one weak joint in Ahlborg's harness!

Unconsciously, he hoped, Greta had been a tool. Taverner, red-faced and beaming; Taverner, in that absurd *Cyrano de Bergerac* nose, had been cunningly putting him through his paces. Marney had been watching too. When Dighton was in the City perhaps, these two had met and exchanged notes and their joint decision had had more bearing on the affair than Taverner's experience of him in the trenches or the result of his encounter with *The Lizard*.

It was two in the afternoon when he hailed a taxi outside Rapallo station and drove to the *Casino*.

A taxi had its advantages over the hotel 'bus; it was decidedly more comfortable, for one thing; for another, it moved independently, without having to await the arrival of late-comers from the train. A glimpse of the Mediterranean, sapphire-blue and reflecting the rays of a not too wintry sun, tempted him to regard the adventure upon which he had embarked through rose-tinted glasses. A stroll in the

direction of Santa Margherita after dinner that evening rendered him more optimistic still.

The winter season was young yet and he encountered few people as he swung easily along, one hand in a pocket and his pipe between his teeth.

At first sight he liked Rapallo—a pleasant, sleepy watering-place, nestling on the shores of a tideless ocean, with dark, tree-girt slopes rising behind, where clustered palatial villas gleaming white like marble. As he saw it now, bathed in the silver light of a growing moon which danced and shimmered in the lapping waters, he found it difficult to remind himself that somewhere close at hand a creature whose genius amounted to madness had fallen upon a secret compared with which the known artifices of modern warfare were negligible.

He shuddered at a passing thought.

If this ghastly invention of Ahlborg's should fall into the wrong hands! If it should become the property of Germany, Bolshevich Russia or one of the yellow races! The results of such a contingency were too dire to contemplate. He wondered if those who had dispatched him on this gigantic errand really realised how much hung upon his failure or success. For the moment he felt crushed, flattened out under the weight of responsibility that rested on his shoulders.

He squared them suddenly and laughed at the stars.

Somehow or other he was going to pull this thing through. He was going to justify Taverner's belief

in him, Marney's and Greta's. The love of a woman like Greta Haye ought to be sufficient inspiration for any man.

He turned back, intending to write to her.

The warning note of an electric horn, strident and imperative, caused him to step to the side of the road and a long white saloon stole past him, coming to a halt at the foot of the small arcade which led to the hotel entrance. He was almost up to it when a door opened and a man got out, a tall, bearded man, broad-shouldered and immaculate.

Pausing in the shadows, Dighton watched him hand a woman from the car. She was slim and dark and bare-headed. As she waited at the foot of the steps while her companion gave some instructions to the driver, the Englishman had time to admire the shapeliness of the silk-encased limbs below the sable coat and the dazzling beauty of the face above.

The man joined her and took her arm.

"*Andiamo, Mafalda,*" he said gruffly, and pointed towards the hotel.

Dighton remained where he was, staring at the dwindling rear-light of the departing saloon.

"Mafalda Pasquali!" he murmured to himself.

Then the other was the inventor of the *Pocket Death!*

Chapter XIV

ON his way through the hall to the elevator Dighton passed Ahlborg and the Signorina Pasquali, deep in conversation with a slim Italian who might well have been a cavalry officer in mufti. In the interval between the pressing of the bell-push and the leisurely descent of the lift, the adventurer, eyeing the group covertly, noted that the stranger addressed his remarks to the girl, subjecting her all the while to a stare that in England would be considered insolent.

The breaking-up of this small gathering coincided with the arrival of the lift. The Italian clicked his heels together, kissed Mafalda Pasquali's hand, stepped back smartly, clicked his heels for a second time and vanished abruptly through the swing-doors.

"*Addio, Capitano!*" she called after him in a shrill, resonant voice, "*Addio e arrividerlo!*"

The colour faded from her cheeks as quickly as it had come there, and she shot an anxious glance at the impassive features of the bearded giant.

The laugh that followed her utterance sounded a trifle forced.

"You surely are not jealous of Enrico, *caro?*" Dighton heard her whisper as they bore down upon the illuminated box in which he was already installed.

Ahlborg said nothing. He was leaning against the wall opposite Dighton, surveying him from head to foot.

Dighton, objecting to a prolonged scrutiny from close-quarters, retaliated in kind. Prompted by a sudden desire to offend Ahlborg rather than an attempt to further his plans, he transferred his gaze from his *vis-a-vis* to the girl beside him, putting even more into the glance than he had at first intended.

He recognised then that she had been staring at him too, for their eyes met. They were still staring at each other when the lift jerked to a standstill and the collapsible gate clanked open.

"*Terzo piano*," he told the attendant as the others got out. The door closed again and the elevator shot upwards.

Secure in his room on the third floor Dighton sat on the edge of his bed, mechanically refilling his pipe. He smiled to himself as he drew out the matches.

Quite suddenly he had become the tool of some mysterious Destiny that was dragging him onwards whether he liked it or not. It was hardly coincidence that he should have met Ahlborg and his companion at the *Casino*, seeing that the inventor frequented the hotel and he had come there from England with that purpose in view. It was the fact, however, that he had run into him on his first night in Rapallo and shared the lift with him that struck him as being extraordinary, although, strictly speaking, there was no reason why the meeting should have taken place

on the fifth or sixth evening any more than the first. What was really remarkable was the effect of his first shaft on Mafalda Pasquali.

The moment she was conscious of his regard she had started violently. A flush of deepest carmine had flooded her face and neck and she had trembled visibly. In a flash the trembling had ceased and he had become aware of eyes like powerful magnets, drawing him. It was as if that single, malicious glance of his had set in motion hidden machinery of whose power and possibilities he was wholly ignorant.

Across the carpeted floor, he watched yellow curtains flapping against a dressing-table of polished satin-wood and his thoughts drifted back to a night in Taverner's study, when other curtains had blown against an overturned table and he had seen the first victim of Ahlborg's *Pocket Death*.

It was simple for Marney to suggest an intrigue with Ahlborg's bewitching paramour. Without the exchange of a single word, he was more than half-way towards that goal now—and yet he was neither triumphant nor elated at his success. These people with whom he was dealing were not ordinary people: *The Lizard* was an expert in crime, Ahlborg an expert chemist. With these accepted facts in view, he had no reason to suppose that Mafalda Pasquali was any less an expert in her particular sphere of operations.

He paced the room restlessly for some moments, with the pipe between his teeth and the match still unstruck.

It was his job to cultivate the friendship of Mafalda, he told himself. It was not a question of unfaithfulness to Greta, but a definite move towards a definite end. He tried to persuade himself that the task did not appeal to him, that he had agreed to it because there was no other alternative, and that he was strong enough to extricate himself when the crucial moment arrived. And yet, somewhere behind all this, there lurked an element of doubt. The eyes of Mafalda Pasquali were distinctly disturbing, completing as they did a picture with whose loveliness he was already impressed.

It was approaching ten when he crossed the road by the bridge which led from the hotel to the Casino itself and entered the gardens which decorated the cliff-edge. Dimly conscious of a firmament of twinkling stars, of coloured lamps lining an asphalt path through shadowy foliage, of the seething of water among rocks somewhere below, he made his way in the direction of a wide entrance hall and the strains of a dance orchestra.

Under a domed roof, on a polished floor bounded on two sides by tall, plate-glass windows, a dozen couples were dancing, with eight or ten others looking on.

He paused on the threshold, fingering his tie.

His first survey of the gathering failed to reveal the face of a single soul he knew even by sight. He spotted Ahlborg presently, over at the far end, sitting with his huge hands clasped between his knees and con-

versing with an elderly, grey-haired woman in a black frock. A minute later he made out Mafalda, dancing with a little fat man who seemed hot and not very expert. A youth who was obviously English swept past him, partnering a flapper with ugly legs.

A light hand fell on his arm, and a voice that was strangely familiar breathed in his ear.

"*Ma foi*, but it is surely the fair *Anglais* from the train! You remember me, M'sieur?"

Dighton turned.

He remembered her quite well. It was Mdlle. Rollin, the bird of passage, looking more artificial and more radiant than ever. He wondered what had happened to Blythe.

"How d'you do?" he murmured and stuck both hands in his pockets. A renewal of their brief acquaintance did not appeal to him vastly.

"Oh," pursued the siren, "but you will dance with me? It is too absurd. There are not enough men here, you know and the orchestra is really playing quite well."

Dighton capitulated.

"You were too proud to take the little 'bus from the station," insinuated Mdlle. Rollin as they danced. "My friend and I saw you walk into a taxi like a Grand Duke!—And the little American has left you? That is a pity, *hein?*—He was very rude, of course, but he was also very amusing—How do you like this place?"

"Not bad," he returned.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I'm afraid it is going to be very quiet—too quiet, perhaps. They say the scenery is beautiful, but you do not want to look at scenery all the time. It is so cold too."

"Yes," said Dighton absently; "I suppose it is."

They were abreast of Mafalda and her partner now and her dark eyes were flashing messages which the adventurer was endeavouring to pick up.

Superimposed as it were on the unceasing stream of chatter that trickled from Middle Rollin's lips, he deciphered: "Who is that woman you are dancing with?—An abandoned creature surely!—This fat brute who is holding me dances like a pig!"

Other couples came in between them, and reception was bad after that. A moment later the music stopped abruptly, and the Signorina Pasquali, freed in some miraculous way from her burden, touched him deliberately on her way out.

Dighton escorted the Rollin woman to a chair, assured himself that Ahlborg was still occupied with the dowager in the black frock and hurried from the room. As he scrambled into his overcoat he caught a fleeting glimpse of a slender form in sables hovering by the outer doorway. A small hand, twinkling with diamonds, waved him a little gesture that fired the blood in his veins. Hastening into the garden, he caught the little *tap-tap-tap* of feminine heels on asphalt, and a ripple of mocking laughter from somewhere close at hand.

A game of hide-and-seek, tantalisingly prolonged, led him presently down flights of crazy steps to a sort of rocky harbour by the bathing-place. There was nothing but the ocean in front, the towering cliff behind and two flesh-coloured stockings showing against a patch of blackness.

He stood for a space with his back to her, gazing at the circles of white foam bubbling around the rocks. A second ripple of laughter, just audible against the noise of the sea, decided him.

He approached the owner of the flesh-coloured stockings.

"So the beautiful *signorina* is tired of dancing with her fat friend?" he suggested.

Something glinted yellow in a truant ray of light, and a multitude of rings jarred against the cover of a small gold box.

"Perhaps," she returned softly, "the *signore* will oblige me with a match."

"A match?" echoed Dighton, uncomprehending.

"Why, yes. I came here to smoke—to look at the sea and think. For what else do you suppose I came?"

He struck a match and held it out to her and the touch of their fingers thrilled him.

He sat down beside her.

"A more conceited man than myself might have been tempted to believe that you wanted him to follow!"

Again that tantalising ripple of amusement.

"So you imagine you are the one man in this world who is not conceited!—You flatter yourself, *Signore*."

"I flatter myself that the beautiful Signorina Pasquali believed my company would prove amusing."

There was a period of silence after that, in which the lighted tip of her cigarette glowed and died so many times that he wondered if he had offended her.

"Who told you my name, *Signore*?"

Dighton bit his lip. He had made a slip here and he lied to cover it.

"I asked the lift attendant after you had gone out."

"And he told you some spiteful things about me?"

"He told me your name; nothing more."

She flicked a little cylinder of ash clear of her coat.

"You have not told me yours?"

"Mine?—Oh, Dighton."

"Is that all?"

"Alan Dighton!"

She repeated it several times, as if to impress it on her memory.

"You speak Italian very well for an Englishman," she continued. "What do you think of my country, *Signore*?"

He moved along the seat until his shoulder touched her coat.

"It is a country of wonderful women!"

"And men——?"

"A man is not interested in men."

"And you think you are interested in *me*?"

Dighton smiled.

"Shall I offend you, *Signorina*, if I suggest that we are mutually interested?"

She shot off at a tangent.

"Who was that dreadful creature you were dancing with?"

"That?—Oh, a woman who spoke to me in the train."

Dark eyes, brought suddenly close to his own, scrutinised him keenly.

"Listen!" she declared. "The man you saw me with to-night is very powerful and very jealous. If he were to come here now, he would be furious. You must find someone in the hotel who will introduce you. After that, perhaps, we can dance sometimes—"

She broke off abruptly.

"What was that?" she demanded breathlessly.

Dighton listened.

"The water against the rocks," he answered presently.

She was trembling from head to foot.

"It was something else," she insisted. "I heard a pebble fall on the stones outside. Someone is coming down those steps. It is Karl, perhaps, come to look for me. *Dio!* this is terrible!"

Dighton sprang to his feet.

Her sudden outburst was unsettling, but he did not believe there was anyone there.

"I'll go and look," he said.

"You must go, in any case," she whispered. "Go back to the ball-room. I will follow presently. Whatever happens, you must never let him suspect——"

The words faded from her lips.

A shadow blocked the entrance of the narrow recess, but it was not Ahlborg's. Instead of the towering form of her lover, there loomed the dapper figure of a man in a belted coat. Recoiling instinctively, Dighton recognised the oddly luminous mask and jade-rimmed monocle of *The Lizard*. . . .

Chapter XV

The Lizard, with grey velour hat set at a dissolute angle and eyes flashing hatred through those circles of amber talc!

Dighton was fairly caught this time.

Glancing downwards, with much the same curiosity as a man might display towards a dental forceps being removed from a glass tray or a surgical instrument about to be employed on him under an anæsthetic that was purely local and left the senses alert, he recognised the stumpy barrel of Ahlborg's deadly pistol and the twisted wires which trailed away from it to his assailant's pocket. He had felt it jab into his stomach a fraction of a second only after realising who it was who had surprised them.

In that moment of electrical silence quite ordinary sounds seemed queerly magnified: the chafing of fretful waters thirty feet away had developed into an angry roar; his own heart-beats were like the thumping of a blacksmith's hammer, mingled with the more *staccato* vibrations of his watch. Mafalda, muttering under her breath, might have been bellowing in his ear.

"*Dio !*" she moaned. "What bandit is this? What does he want with us?"

Dighton was thankful that she did not scream. Her shrill alarm, echoing and re-echoing among the

assistance in the shape of Mafalda Pasquali. Tearing her rings from her fingers in feverish haste, she held them cupped in her two hands together with the gold cigarette-case, and slipped between the two men.

This sudden action, carried out with the sole object of satisfying the demands of a common free-booter, produced consequences which she could never have foreseen. It was evident too, that she had no knowledge of the invention of the man under whose protection she lived.—*The Lizard*, dazzled and disconcerted by the glittering pile held under his nose, stepped back sharply, knocking his elbow against the jagged edge of the recess. Dighton, on the other hand, appalled at the danger which threatened the girl rather than himself, grabbed at the other's pistol-arm with both hands and forced the point of the weapon upwards.

Compared with the insignificance of his stature the strength of *The Lizard* was colossal. Thrusting him into the open was like moving an iron pillar. A pliant wrist brought the pistol inches downwards, and the first hissing round from *The Pocket Death* passed over Dighton's shoulder, setting his ears singing. It dawned upon the adventurer at that moment that it had killed Mafalda. She had been thrown roughly aside in the struggle, with her scattered trinkets making a succession of metallic sounds on the concrete platform. He believed she had been immediately behind them at the time of the discharge.

A second struggle ensued in which *The Lizard* sought to transfer the pistol to his other hand. Dighton, frenzied at Mafalda's supposed fate, brought every muscle into play. The fingers of one hand had closed on the weapon itself and, baresark as he had ever been in a raid into no-man's-land, he schemed to blot out his antagonist by the very means that he himself employed. If he could only turn one of the two remaining rounds upon *The Lizard* half his troubles would be at an end. The course to his goal would be straight, without any of those disconcerting side-issues that this masked assassin was always liable to entail. He would have avenged Corlitt, the French girl and Mafalda, and the sea would swallow up most of the traces of the crime.

They had reeled to the edge of that concrete base, with Dighton gaining the ascendancy and the other fighting with all the low tactics of a desperate savage. A knee, taking Dighton in the region of the belt, all but winded him; aching points along his shins testified to the activity of *The Lizard's* boots. Somewhere in the midst of this extraordinary conflict a second round sent pungent fumes into the blue—and then, tripped by his adversary, Dighton fell heavily. His head struck a projecting spur, forcing him to loose his hold. The next moment *The Lizard* was crouching between him and the sea with the *Pocket Death* still in his possession.

The adventurer was on his feet again when the thing misfired. Midway between the weapon and the

other's pocket something sparked savagely . . . ineffectively. . . . Half-surmising what had occurred, Dighton sprang forward, seized *The Lizard's* belt and swung him above his head like a doll.

He had a memory of arms and legs jerking spasmodically, of a struggling burden of which he was glad to be rid—and then a joyous sense of utter freedom, a queer white object bobbing about in the water below him and the *Pocket Death* dangling from his own arm by wires that had somehow got entangled there.

The mask had vanished by the time he had scrambled down. He saw a placid ocean stretching to the far horizon, rocks like great fangs each with its circle of white foam and a rugged background of cliffs. There was nothing else.

The distant strains of a popular jazz-tune drifted to him from the far-off Casino. A timid wave, sending up a handful of spray like an impish child, splashed him from head to foot, but he did not bother even to wipe it away.

Presently he turned and went back to the recess. He believed he had avenged three people.

Chapter XVI

ON his way from the water's edge he stuffed his new possession into a pocket of his coat, twisting the wires round and round the barrel so that the container and the pistol rested side by side. The entire apparatus made a parcel that was both bulky and inconvenient, but he kept it out of sight for fear of meeting Ahlborg on the stone steps or in the Casino gardens.

When Mafalda Pasquali, shivering and a little hysterical, emerged from the recess where they had been sitting before the arrival of *The Lizard* he started violently, believing that his senses had tricked him.

"What have you done with him?" she demanded excitedly.

Dighton spread out his hands.

"He tried to murder me—and I pitched him into the sea."

She swayed suddenly and clung to him.

"Holy Mother!" she whispered; "it was terrible! There were clouds of smoke everywhere. It choked me. I ran into that place for shelter—and something passed me like a scorching wind. I thought he had killed you."

Dighton held her at arm's length, smiling reassuringly.

"As a matter of fact, I thought that he had killed *you!*" he told her. "I fancy that was what made me mad. I believe I could have slaughtered the blighter in cold blood without the slightest compunction."

She eyed him for some moments in silence.

"You were wonderful," she announced at length.

He laughed aloud.

"To tell you the honest truth, I was as nervous as a kitten! When I found that thing sticking into my *tummy*, I went cold all over."

"I don't believe you."

"Of course you don't. I don't want you to believe me. I want you to imagine me a dashing hero, ready to do all sorts of things at a wave of your little finger! What about those rings?"

He picked up one as he spoke, a single sapphire, diamond-shaped, surrounded by a border of brilliants. Five minutes search over the concrete slab revealed the remainder.

They parted at the foot of the steps.

"I must go back to Signor Ahlborg," she said. "He will be wondering what has happened to me. We must have been away hours——"

"Just forty minutes," corrected Dighton, consulting his watch.

She made a little grimace.

"And fifty minutes ago you were dancing with that dreadful Frenchwoman. *Ebbene!* I forgive you—partly because I think you saved my life to-night and partly because—I like you! I drive to Portofino

Mare to-morrow, not in the car, you know, but in a *vettura*. My doctor tells me a drive in an open carriage is good for me. I shall be there towards eleven—alone——”

Dighton nodded.

“I shall be there too,” he assured her. “My doctor has recommended walking as good for the liver!”

They both laughed.

As he pressed his lips to her hand he remembered something.

To-night is our secret, *Signorina*; all of it. We will say nothing about our assassin, my struggle with him or his gun. His body may be washed up to-morrow, you understand, and it is better to know nothing about these things.”

A white forefinger rested across her lips.

“They are sealed,” she assured him; “absolutely sealed.”

Ten stairs above him she turned.

“Will you swear to me you do not know who that man was?”

“I have not the remotest idea.”

She glanced out to sea.

“It is strange that he should have come upon us like that. That horrible mask, too! I shall dream of it!—*Buona notte, caro!*”

She was gone with that, and Dighton watched her slim form passing from one flight to the other until the summit was reached.

Before following her example, he filled and lit a pipe. Scanning the entire coast-line within view he found no trace of his recent antagonist. Unless he managed to see the body after fishermen had brought it in, the identity of *The Lizard* would never be revealed. The realisation of this left him disappointed. Unsolved mysteries were always unsatisfactory. And yet, after all, the only thing that really mattered was the fact that his enemy had ceased to exist.

Dighton did not go back for another dance. He crossed to the hotel by the bridge and ordered a drink from his room. He ordered a double whisky—and felt that he had earned it. It was the remedy Taverner would have advised—a nightcap to an adventure of which Taverner would have approved.

With the *Pocket Death* locked in a suit-case, he slept soundly, as soundly in fact as any ordinary guest who had travelled South for his health. He had not dealt with Ahlborg yet, *The Lizard* was polluting the Mediterranean, and he had a rendezvous on the morrow with the bewitching Mafalda!

His last waking thought concerned Marney. He wondered how long it would be before the little American made his way to the room at the back of the fruiterer's shop in the *Via Emilia*. When that worthy did come to town he would have news for him.

On the following morning Dighton breakfasted early and went out. Half-an-hour's stiff walking over wooded hillsides brought him to a lane that was

little more than a cart-track, which led him between high banks towards a formidable iron gateway just visible ahead. He was within a score of yards of this when he caught the sound of heavy bodies crashing through the bushes to his right. Suddenly, almost on a level with his head, four enormous wolf-hounds came into view, snarling and baring their fangs in a frenzy of furious excitement.

Dighton pushed on, keeping discreetly to the far side of the track. As far as he was able to see, there was nothing to prevent these beasts hurling themselves at him from the bank. Half-wild as they were, however, they did not attempt to cross the boundary-line allotted them for protection, but coursed up and down it, reminding the traveller at every step that any attempt at entering the grounds of the *Villa Sabino* would entail fatal consequences.

He did not pause at the gates. The ceaseless din above him was too deafening, and he had no desire to attract more attention to himself than was necessary. From a metalled road which branched presently to his left he obtained a view of the villa and out-buildings interrupted only by a line of tall trees and the low roof of a porter's lodge.

The one thought at the back of Dighton's mind when he dropped down the steep path to Portofino was that the *Villa Sabino* was not going to be broken into too easily. There was at least a hundred yards of gravel drive to be traversed before the square-fronted main building was reached, and the finest

sprinter on record could not hope to outstrip those hounds. Without the dogs, and assuming Ahlborg had not concealed a battery of his guns in the bushes, access to the property could be gained from innumerable points and there was ample cover to enable an intruder to approach the house without being observed.

Marney had declared that the dogs could not be poisoned. From a business point of view, this was a pity. It certainly prevented Dighton from employing methods which went against the grain. At a rough calculation, the grounds of the villa ran into three acres and the Alsatians had a free run over the whole area. Nor was their number restricted to four, for he had detected a distant baying of other dogs presumably from kennels at the rear of the building. It was conceivable that during the dark hours at least a dozen of these powerful brutes performed guard-duty along the fringes of Ahlborg's territory.

The roofs of Portofino were below him when he framed the idea of retaining the *Pocket Death*, repairing the place where the electrical contrivance that fired the charge had *shorted* and using the last round on the dogs when attacked by them in the midst of a desperate raid. The flaw in this was so obvious that he discarded it almost immediately. It was improbable that every dog on the place would make for him at one time or, even if they did so, that they would be confined in so small a compass that the one round would account for them.

No, the *Villa Sabino* was to all intents and purposes impregnable, except by artifice. Future and more thorough surveys of this field of enterprise might reveal points which both Marney and himself had overlooked; but only Mafalda and Ahlborg could approach the building unchallenged and with impunity, and it was through the former that he must eventually obtain admission.

He would drop in at Marney's lodgings that evening and see if he had returned. As soon as he had found him, he would entrust the weapon to him for safe transit to Taverner. The recovery of the *Pocket Death* would be a sop to the Chief. It would assure him that Dighton had not been idle and keep him from worrying over the long period of apparent inactivity which the adventurer felt must necessarily follow. You could not walk up to a girl like Mafalda Pasquali and say: "I think you are absolutely charming. Please take me home with you to Ahlborg's villa!" A question of this nature had to be approached warily, delicately. It would have to be insinuated, rather than voiced, at a time when she was sufficiently influenced to be unsuspecting. There would have to be some strong reason for selecting the place—and, at the moment, Dighton could not imagine a reason that would be in the least bit convincing. The home of the other man in an *affaire de coeur* seemed the last place on earth in which to prosecute an intrigue.

He stepped from the open hillside into a road running between fisherman's cottages, with a pale

sun shining from a cloudless sky turning the keen air into a feeling of an English spring. To his left, tenement buildings of moderate size and weather-beaten aspect hugged the waterside; a shabby restaurant to his right advertised strange beverages on uninspiring windows, and exposed to the open air a handful of green-painted chairs. Immediately ahead of him, beyond the broad walk between the houses and the sea, white yachts and fishing vessels with russet sails snuggled in a horseshoe harbour of unsurpassed loveliness.

In this miniature bay of dreams, perched on a bollard in the shelter of a wall of rock, he found Mafalda.

The sable coat had given place to a serviceable waterproof, the evening frock to a costume of knitted wool. Altogether she looked more human than when he had first seen her, more like the type of woman he would have set out in normal times to meet.

"So you have kept your word," was her greeting. Dighton paused in front of her.

"You speak as if you were surprised!"

Mafalda favoured him with a curious smile.

"It would be both unwise and ill-mannered," she declared, "to show you that I was delighted!"

Chapter XVII

IN the days that followed Dighton suffered many twinges of conscience.

He had looked upon the course Taverner had chosen for him as difficult and, quite probably, dangerous. It had never dawned upon him for one instant that Mafalda would be seriously attracted to him. If he had considered her feelings at all, he had viewed her in the light of a more or less immoral woman to whom a succession of love-affairs was part and parcel of her existence. He did not suppose that her affair with him would be regarded in a serious light or, that after it had run its brief course, it would leave any lasting mark on her. In this, as it speedily transpired, his calculations were at fault.

A succession of picnics at Recco, Portofino Vetta or Carasco, secret theatre trips to Genoa, drives to Chiavari or Nervi left him fearful lest the news of their intrigue should drift to the ears of the unsuspecting Ahlborg. He wondered how long it would be before her mine of plausible excuses to this bearded giant would give out, before they would wear too thin to be even credible.

From the date of their first assignation, the rôle of hunter had passed from him to her. It was she who planned these meetings and worked herself up into jealous fury if he demurred.

The trouble of it all was that Dighton was both young and possessed of a conscience. More than that, he was in love with Greta and detested this other business heartily. Admittedly he was attracted to the Signorina Pasquali, but not infatuated. The fervour of her whirlwind tactics left him breathless. He could imagine Marney, with his uncanny knowledge of everything that went on around him, indulging in an appreciative chuckle: Taverner, had he been able to realise to the full the actual trend of affairs, would have been equally elated. When Mafalda fixed the adventurer with her big, southern eyes, he felt that Greta was watching him; when he wrote to her he felt like a criminal.

A thousand times he was tempted to throw in his hand, to take the first train homewards with the admission to Taverner that he was a failure. And yet an admission of failure was the one thing of which he was utterly incapable.

The moods of Mafalda were as extraordinary as they were varied. At times she would treat him as her father-confessor, regretting incidents in her life and imploring his forgiveness.

"You see, *caro mio*," she would explain, "a woman is just as she is made. It is terrible to have beauty and temperament—and no money! And I could not possibly foresee that you would come."

On one of their rambles along the coast beyond the eastward extremities of Rapallo they had come upon a skeleton of a building that for some reason

had never been completed. Its foundations were in the cliff itself and a gaping hole on the site of a lower room gave glimpses of a subterranean cavern.

She had hovered on the brink of this chasm as if it fascinated her.

"If I ever thought that you had ceased to care for me," she had told him, "I would throw myself down there."

She had swayed on the edge and pretended to have lost her balance, so that he was forced to take her in his arms and drag her away.

"Hold me," she whispered when they were out on the grass again. "Hold me like that with your big, strong arms. I am afraid when you are not holding me."

She appeared to regard him as an antidote to Ahlborg and other men she had known.

"You are the cleanest man that I have ever met," she told him incessantly. "Your kisses are like a brother's! If I had only found you ten years ago! I was sixteen then and I had no brothers!"

Her excuse for returning to the *Villa Sabino* after these adventures was always that she was afraid of Ahlborg—and Dighton was glad she was afraid. He was relieved too that she regarded him as a lover with brotherly qualities. In this, at least, she was consistent.

His introduction to the inventor had constituted almost a breach of their agreement.

Three nights after the incident in the recess at the foot of the cliff she had brought Ahlborg up to him in the dance-hall.

"Karl," she said, "I want you to know this gentleman. A thief attacked me in the gardens the other night, threatened me with a revolver and attempted to steal my rings. Mr. Dighton came to my rescue and drove him off."

The next moment Dighton was on his feet, flushed and a little confused, returning the pressure of the other's enormous fingers.

"I am much obliged to you, Mr. Dighton.—A thief, eh?—It is the first I have heard of it."

The adventurer spread out his hands.

"It was nothing, I assure you. I had just crossed from the hotel.—I'm staying there for a few weeks, you know.—There was absolutely no bother. The fellow made off as I came up."

Mafalda had put him in an embarrassing position, but she had achieved her purpose. The introduction was made and they were free to dance together. Ahlborg, besides, was disposed to be friendly. The thing was panning out like clockwork, and yet Dighton was annoyed with Mafalda for referring in any way to an incident which he had hoped was closed.

The lack of men, his prowess at dancing, combined with the departure of Mdle. Rollin and her companion for San Remo, roped him in a whole host of fresh acquaintances. He had a nodding acquaintance with a princess from the Balkans, a friendship with

an aged *contessa* from Rome and a charming leader of local society who organised bridge parties and *thé-dansants*. If he had been on holiday and as unattached as when Corlitt had cross-examined him in his office, he would have enjoyed himself thoroughly. As it was, he joined in these festivities with mixed feelings.

The storm that was brewing around the *Villa Sabino* would have to burst sometime. Whenever and however it came, there was bound to be a sensation, and he wondered in what light these people would regard him when he had gone.

Towards the end of his second week something happened that was more disturbing than his fears for the future or Mafalda's passionate advances.

Marney had returned at last. He had seen him seated at a table outside a *café* in the centre of the town, sipping cognac and soda and talking to an Italian. Marney had looked at him, but shown no sign of recognition. His look was good enough for Dighton. He planned to call on him that night with the weapon he had recaptured from *The Lizard*.

He did not go back to the hotel at once. One of those many appointments with Mafalda kept him out until it was time to dress for dinner.

He spent the day in a state of suppressed excitement. He was looking forward to a chat with Marney, the only person in Italy to whom he could unburden his soul. He would tell him how the lone game was progressing, about Mafalda and Ahlborg, and discuss

the possibilities of an invasion of the scientist's laboratories. Marney would have news for him, fresh instructions, fresh theories. They would smoke and yarn and, out of it all, he would find something that would give him renewed enthusiasm for his work.

As soon as the meal was over he changed into a suit of tweeds, drawing over it the waterproof he had worn in Paris after the incident in the Rue des Acacias. Residents of the Via Emilia did not run to evening-dress and he had no desire to appear conspicuous.

His last act before leaving was to unlock the suit-case in which he had placed the *Pocket Death*.

He knew exactly the position in the case in which he had put it, had looked in a dozen times at least since it had come into his possession to assure himself it was still there. He lifted the lid a bare six inches and thrust in his hand.

His fingers touched nothing but the bare lining.

Gripped by a sudden sensation of loss, that sent a cold feeling creeping down his spine and brought the perspiration on to his forehead in little beads, he thrust the lid open to its fullest extent.

The pistol was gone!

Through misted eyes he saw a pair of shoe-trees reposing in a corner at the back, a Continental timetable, an odd coat-hanger—and a flat green disc to show that *The Lizard* had been. . . .

He staggered back to the bed, one hand to his brow.

It was incredible . . . inconceivable. . . . He had seen him drowning—there at the foot of the Casino cliffs; and yet here was irrefutable evidence that made him doubt the testimony of his own eyes!

He embarked upon a hurried examination of the room.

Nothing had been disturbed, there was no sign that anyone had been there—and yet the case had been unlocked and rifled and locked again!

Corlitt's grim warning drifted back to him:

"You will be playing . . . against people infinitely more clever than yourself."

He had played with a vengeance—and *The Lizard* had beaten him all hands down!

Chapter XVIII

MARNEY, upon whom Dighton vented his woes in that shabby parlour behind the greengrocer's shop, with its dearth of comfortable furniture and array of photographic enlargements of the greengrocer's ancestors, was inclined to take this latest development philosophically.

"You're doing fine," was his comment. "You've covered a lot of valuable ground since I saw you last, and it's no use blaming yourself for the loss of that gun.—There's a whole lot more of the blessed things in that villa up there!"

The other was seated on a bentwood chair, with his hands clasped between his knees.

"That's true enough," he admitted gloomily. "The question is—how are we going to get at 'em?"

Marney removed the chewed end of the inevitable *Toscano* from his lips and blew out a thin stream of smoke.

"I'll admit it's a tough proposition," he conceded, "but nothing on this earth's impossible, provided you set your mind to it. Langley took six weeks over the job, but he got there in the end, and came away with what he wanted. He was so almighty pleased with himself that he forgot to make allowances for *The Lizard*—and that was what proved his undoing.

We've none of us made proper allowances for *The Lizard*, when you come to figure it out. If we had, the *Pocket Death* would never have left Taverner's studio. However, that's neither here nor there. The problem upon which we've to concentrate is getting past those dogs. You've seen them, Dighton?"

His companion nodded.

"Magnificent beasts, aren't they?" pursued the American. Putting them where they are was a stroke of genius on Ahlborg's part. You can't reason with a dog of that sort; you can't bribe him either, and there's no earthly hope of catching him napping. According to Langley's last report to the Chief, Ahlborg had so much confidence in the brutes that he kept most of the rooms in his place unlocked. He hadn't anticipated Langley's move, you see. As I think I explained to you before, he's taken steps to ensure against a similar thing occurring again."

He hooked a bottle of brandy from a cupboard at his side and held it up to the light.

"No, Dighton, there's only one road into the *Villa Sabino*—and you're on it."

"It isn't as straight as it looks," said Dighton.

The other was on his hands and knees, groping for glasses. He glanced back over his shoulder.

"In this business," he returned sententiously, "you'll rarely find a road that is! When you've been in it as long as I have you'll mistrust anything that looks simple, or obvious or straight ahead. The

Signora Fontanelli is a bad hand at wiping glasses, by the by, but I daresay you'll overlook her short comings. How'll you take it? About that, eh?"

The other uttered an exclamation and covered the tumbler with his hand.

Marney was not so generous with the soda.

"Generally speaking," he resumed presently, "things have been quiet since you've been here. Ahlborg's turned down every offer he's received up to now, and the acknowledged representatives of most foreign Powers have retired to their respective Capitals to think things over. The vultures are still here, but they're not showing themselves. Come to think of it, Dighton, you're the only one of the whole bunch that's got what you might term a gentleman's job. Germany's represented by a waiter at the *Nettuno*—a Swiss from the wrong part of Switzerland rejoicing in the name of Dopmann. I guess you'll have seen his picture in London. A watchmaker in the *Via Humberto* looks after French interests. Kamaga—a Jap feller—blows in from Genoa about ten times as often as is necessary to sell silk-goods for a firm in Yokohama. China's paying good money to a Greek bank-clerk in the *Credito*, Poland and Czecho-Slovakia don't cut much ice, but musicians in jazz-orchestras scout for each of 'em. Spain's not represented as far as I know, and I haven't located the Soviet man. The United States aren't bitten yet with the Ahlborg fever. Maybe they figure Ahlborg's dope isn't all it's cracked up

to be; maybe they think they've found something better."

He screwed up his face.

"Queer, ain't it? This little, one-horse town, with a few palm-trees to set it off, a panorama or two and a casino, just seething with secret agents—and yet if you tried to persuade anyone outside the charmed circle that this was so, you'd be called a liar to your face!"

Rising as he spoke, he lifted down a shabby overcoat from the back of the door.

"Tell you what, Dighton; we'll slip up and have another look at Ahlborg's outfit now. I'll give you ten minutes start of me. You can hang around on the track behind your hotel until I come."

Dighton came to his feet.

"Just as you like," he replied; "I'm game for anything."

He paused at the doorway between the room and the darkened shop.

By the way, Marney," he remembered, "you haven't told me yet what your particular side-line is."

"Young feller," retorted the American with mock dignity, "I am a learned professor of foreign languages. Poor, but very honest—and very deserving! Have another *peg* before you go out? Say, what the hell are you laughing at anyway, Dighton? Have I said anything funny?"

The other choked.

"Oh, no, old dear! nothing whatever! Poor, but very deserving! Oh, my hat, Marney, that's the richest thing I've heard for weeks!"

He groped his way out to the street.

Half-an-hour later Marney joined him under the trees and they trudged along together towards the *Villa Sabino*.

The night was fine and cold, and there was a suggestion of mist in the air. Glancing backwards, Dighton caught glimpses of a placid ocean shimmering in the light of a rising moon. Distant sounds of dance-music floated up to him from the *Casino*, and he wondered if Mafalda were there, looking for him.

Marney's voice, coming on top of his thoughts, startled him.

"Don't trust that Pasquali woman any more than you can help, Dighton. How did she figure, by the way, when *The Lizard* blew off that couple of rounds?"

Dighton frowned.

"She was scared stiff."

"Maybe," assented the other with a touch of irritation. "What I'm getting at is—did she appear to know what the dope was?"

"No."

"Didn't ask any awkward questions about it afterwards?"

"None whatever."

Marney whistled softly.

"My!" he ejaculated; "that looks bad!"

"How d'you mean?"

"Well," declared Marney, "she may be all right—and she may not. Most women of my acquaintance would have displayed a whole lot of curiosity towards a gun that fired blue smoke instead of a bullet. You'd think, too, that she'd have picked up some ideas about the stuff through living with Ahlborg."

"Ahlborg's a reticent devil."

"Just so, but women have queer ways of getting at the truth. I'm not suggesting she's not crazy on you, mind you, nor that she suspects you're anything but the casual visitor to Rapallo you make out to be. But there's always the possibility that somebody's paying her to keep sweet with Karl Ahlborg—and if that's the case you'll have to keep your eyes skinned for trouble."

Dighton thrust both hands in his overcoat pockets and yawned.

"Lord, Marney!" he commented, "what a complicated business this is! If you go on much longer I shall begin to think there isn't a single soul in the universe I can trust."

Marney was lighting a fresh cigar.

"There's mighty few you can," he retorted with sudden fierceness. "The secret service of any country you like to mention works on lines of mutual distrust. If a colleague goes back on you and gets his tale in first, you've got to take it lying down;

You can't write to the papers about it anyway! You'll get hardened to that sort of thing by and by."

Dighton smiled.

"It hasn't cropped up yet," he reminded him.

"No," said the other, "but it will. There are big prices being offered for the sort of stuff we're out for, and the kind of man who takes his life in his hand ain't too particular about changing his nationality. You'll——"

He broke off abruptly. Catching Dighton's arm he dragged him through a gap in the hedge.

"Someone coming up the path behind us," he whispered as they flattened out on the moist turf. "A labourer coming home from the town maybe, but we're not taking chances."

Dighton listened intently, but heard nothing. Either Marney was wrong, or he had ears like a rabbit's. Three minutes elapsed—five—and then from somewhere close at hand came the sound of whispered voices. Two men speaking in a guttural tongue—German, Dighton thought. The talking came nearer, two heavy-footed, slouching forms passed on the far side of the hedge, followed at an interval of about thirty yards by a big, broad-shouldered fellow in a high-crowned felt.

"Say!" murmured Marney when they had gone; "that looks like business!"

"What are they?" queried the other. "Germans?" Marney nodded.

"You can bet your life they are. The first two were strangers to me. Spies from another area, most likely imported by Dopmann to help him in the stunt and clear right out."

Dighton was on his feet now, pausing before passing back through the gap. He rubbed his hands together and grinned at the darkness.

"We're in luck's way to-night," he declared. "We can hang around and see how these three get on. If they're lucky, we'll have to fight 'em for the loot; if they fail, we ought to learn something of Ahlborg's method's of defence."

Marney came right up to him.

"Have you got a gun?" he demanded.

"Rather! Have you?"

"I always have. Personally, I fancy it better than Ahlborg's tool. I'm used to it, you see."

They had gone fifty yards when Dighton spoke again:

"Who was the big fellow?"

"Heinrich Dopmann himself. He's got his marching orders from Berlin right enough. If he pulls it off—they'll be advertising for a new waiter at the *Nettuno* to-morrow!"

Dighton straightened his shoulders. Looking up at him, the American noticed that his chin had taken on an aggressive tilt.

"Dopmann's not pulling anything off to-night, old son," he asserted. "If this precious scheme of his shows signs of holding water at all, I'm going to

take advantage of it. Kicking my heels about in Rapallo's getting on my nerves."

"*You ?*" ejaculated Marney. "What d'you mean?"

"You'll see," said the other, "when the time comes."

He increased the pace until the shorter man had difficulty in keeping up with him.

"Hullo!" announced Dighton presently, "the raid's started and the defending party's got wind of it!"

From the far side of Ahlborg's territory, vehement and awe-inspiring, came the deep baying of the hounds. . . .

Chapter XIX

MARNEY, panting up the final slope to the grounds of the *Villa Sabino*, stared at the back of the man in front, and his gaze carried with it pleasurable anticipation combined with a touch of apprehension.

This easy-going, easy-tempered Englishman had changed so suddenly that it was difficult to believe he was the same being. Somewhere, between their slipping into the field and out of it again, the subtle transformation had taken place. He had entered the gap a raw novice, looking up to the American for sympathy and guidance; he had repassed it with determination shining from his blue eyes and every sense alert. There was no doubt in Marney's mind at that moment who was the real leader of their little party of two.

He held his head high, like a war-horse scenting battle. Without need of warning from the older man, he walked in the shadows . . . noiselessly . . . warily. He might have been back on the Western Front again, with a platoon camouflaged into nigger minstrels behind him, ready to fall prone at the first star-shell lighting up the heavens.

In the prospect of a *scrap*, he had forgotten Mafalda, forgotten the dance-method of entry to the villa, forgotten even Greta. Dimly at the back of his mind there hovered the notion of covering

the loss of the *Pocket Death* by obtaining possession of a weapon of improved design perhaps—certainly more fully charged. Of one thing he was very certain: whatever the result of the foray might be, he was going all-out to-night.

At the point where on his first visit he had encountered the dogs he held up his hand and waited. The din of barking, still incessant and awe-inspiring, was comparatively distant. It came from somewhere beyond the gates.

"D'you see, Marney," he whispered back when they were almost up to them, "they're pretending to raid from two points on the far side of the trees. Clever that! It's divided the pack and got 'em confused."

They dropped into the ditch on the far side of the road as the lodge door opened and a short, stumpy man came out, putting on his hat. Through the vertical rails of the double gate they saw the oblong of yellow light falling across the drive from the doorway, the scraggy, ill-nourished cat that had followed its master out—and the grim Nemesis that overcame the servant before he had time to utter a sound.

Dopmann did not risk a revolver-shot. Springing from the shadows beyond the gates, with a suddenness that sent the cat scuttling back into the house, he throttled the gate-keeper out of hand.

It was neat, effective, but distinctly unpleasant! It set even the teeth of the veteran Marney chattering.

Tossing his burden into the bushes, Dopmann glanced towards the main building, took to his heels and ran for all the world as if the hounds that threatened his accomplices were at his heels.

Marney realised two things at that moment—that the gates were open and that Dighton had mysteriously vanished. He wondered how it was he had not missed him before. Electing for the time-being at least to stop where he was, he followed the meteoric flight of the German agent along the centre of the drive. In doing so he almost manufactured a smile! He would never have believed that a man of that build and weight could move so fast!

Ahead, in the distance, gleaming white in the moonlight, he could make out the flight of three steps which gave access to Ahlborg's door and constituted Dopmann's goal.

The barking of dogs was still going on; if anything, it had increased in intensity. The cat appeared in the patch of light again, glanced nervously round and dived into the bushes.

Marney tried to collect his thoughts.

Ahlborg and his lady were both out. Marney guessed that. It was one of those things in which the German was better informed than himself. Possibly there was some special function at the Casino that had slipped his notice; possibly the inventor was dining someone at the hotel. He paid a silent tribute to Dopmann's astuteness. He had stolen a march on

him this time, and he looked like getting away with it.

He was within twenty yards of the steps and no dog had come in sight. The distance was halved, quartered. . . . He had reached the entrance to the villa. Marney saw him fumbling for something and his eyes opened wide with amazement. Miracle of miracles, the fellow had a key! Instinctively he eased the automatic at his hip. This was too much of a good thing altogether!

He would have followed himself if he hadn't spotted Dighton. The Englishman, running apparently in the soft earth on the other side of the shrubs, had outstripped the other, judged his time to a nicety, vaulted over the low balustrade—and knocked the burly Dopmann clean over into the garden!

"Hell!" muttered Marney by way of applause.
"Atta Boy!"

It was like being at a theatre!

It was no use following now. It wouldn't serve any purpose, and his job was to hang around unseen to render assistance to his colleague on the return journey.

The door was slammed shut. As far as he could make out, Dighton had gone in—key and all—and Dopmann, nursing a bruised jaw, was rising from the gravel where he had pitched.

Dopmann was uneasy. Marney knew that. He was looking apprehensively round him in the direction from which the barking came.

The American crossed to the other side of the road and took up his position by the stone pillar on which a gate was hung. He had caught some of Dighton's fever now: he was just itching to do something. Dictates, prompted by long experience, barely managed to hold him in. He would have liked to have plugged Dopmann—if only for the cold-blooded murder of the lodge-keeper.

There were servants inside that house, three of them at least, and all men. Marney knew that as well as he knew the geography of the estate. There were two assistants—chemists or something of the kind—lodged in a kind of off-shoot behind the laboratories. They had tasted raids before; Langley, Dighton's predecessor, had made one and there had been other less successful attempts. Waiting out there in the night, trying to follow Dighton's course through the rooms in his imagination, his enthusiasm for an invasion on his own account waned. From an ordinary house with ordinary outbuildings the *Villa Sabino* had built itself up until it resembled the rock of Gibraltar.

He kept pulling out that great gun-metal chronometer of his and pushing it away again. So little time had elapsed between their arrival outside and the time when he examined it that he held it to his ears and listened, believing that it must have stopped.

Another five minutes found him deluged with perspiration. If something did not happen shortly he felt he should go stark, raving mad.

Dopmann was moving along the side of the house now, trying to find a shutter that would yield, still apprehensive of those hounds. A dry chuckle escaped Marney's lips. The windows were too high up and the German's efforts to obtain an entry by them were as graceful as those of an elephant.

Another figure, appearing round the side of the house nearest the German, came suddenly face to face with him. Dopmann was on him like a shot and they rolled to the ground together. There was a prolonged struggle this time, for the newcomer had been half-prepared. In the midst of it an upper window flew open and a head and shoulders were thrust out. Someone was shouting in Italian.

Marney was beginning to get anxious. The alarm was raised with a vengeance; they would have telephoned Ahlborg by this time—unless the astute Dopmann had found means of cutting the wires. Half the police in Rapallo would be on the scene presently.

And then a climax came which he had almost forgotten to expect: The German had mastered his man and retreated from him, apparently undecided whether to make a further attempt at entering or retreat while the road was clear. Something fired at him from the upper window—a revolver which spat twice and missed each time. And then a stray Alsatian, separated by the noise from the main pack, came at Dopmann like a long, avenging shadow. . . .

Marney caught his breath.

The brute was in the midst of its spring when the German loosed his shot. The impetus that had launched the creature from the path was still there, for it passed its intended victim by inches only and floundered to the ground in a crumpled heap.

Everything began happening at once. Dopmann was running towards the gate, white-faced and panic-stricken, with a wounded thing as savage as a wolf lopping on three legs after him. Marney had never seen so much fear in a man's eyes before. A crash of glass from one of the outbuildings hailed the reappearance of Dighton, carrying a bulky elongated object in his arms. Twenty paces from the main building he drew up abruptly, disintegrating a bunch of wolf-hounds that had sprung from nowhere with a fresh weapon he had just unearthed.

Marney was stamping to and fro with suppressed excitement. The weapon he carried was pitifully obsolete, useless against the odds that were multiplying themselves momentarily on the other side of the gates. He had made up his mind what he was going to do. Cold-blooded murder was abhorrent to him, but there were more reasons than one why Dopmann's body should be found in the vicinity of the *Villa Sabino*.

The German agent had conceived this raid, conceived it and carried it out—up to a point. It was up to Dighton and himself to divert attention from themselves. If they found Dopmann dead in the

road, they would think that one of the shots from the window had been responsible.

Dighton had disappeared again, pursuing the same tactics, no doubt, as he had tried on entering. There was only the German in view, with the lone dog gaining on him.

Marney's finger was on the trigger when the hidden batteries of the villa betrayed their existence.

A blue ray, gigantic and dazzling in its intensity, swept the drive from end to end. It was a miracle how it missed Marney. He knew, rather than saw, that Dopmann had fallen and that the dog had found a sudden end to its misery. He had witnessed something that Ahlborg had been reluctant to reveal, something that had cleaned up two living forms as if they had been merely shadows, that put the *Pocket Death* into the veriest shade.

The hidden battery fired one hissing, reeking round and was silent. Dazed and choking, Marney stumbled into the ditch on the far side, as the note of an electric horn smote upon his ears and Ahlborg's white car drew to a standstill outside the gates.

Chapter XX

MARNEY had been right about those police. The white saloon was packed with them. An officer of *carabinieri* on a motor-bicycle arrived before the chauffeur had time to open the gates; headlights flashed all along the road—the main traffic-way from Rapallo.

Moving cautiously, he worked his way along the ditch, going back over the ground by which he and Dighton had come.

There was a lump in his throat as car after car parked outside the villa, emitting an ever-swelling throng of armed men. It had been a chance of a lifetime—and Dighton had taken it. It was a thousand pities that, after so magnificent an effort, the hero of the evening seemed doomed to find lodging in an Italian gaol.

The police, who had entered the gates in a body, were backing out again. There was a hitch somewhere. A sudden frenzy of barking announced that they had encountered the remainder of the pack. Ahlborg was bellowing at the top of his voice—shouting to somebody to tie them up.

Marney shuddered. He wondered if the brutes had out-manceuvred his colleague before turning their attentions upon these fresh invaders.

Orders were being shouted on all sides. The officer, whose motor-cycle was now propped against the gate-post upon which the American had been leaning, had brought half-a-dozen men back into the road and was giving them instructions accompanied by gestures so eloquent that Marney read their meaning without difficulty. They were to examine the ground in the vicinity of the estate, to challenge anybody they found lurking there and to fire if any wayfarer sought to elude them.

There was no help for it: Marney had got to trek!

He knew those *carabinieri*, knew something of their selection and training, and the amount of money they had to lodge with the government as a guarantee of good conduct. In the estimation of everybody who knew them, they stood out as a splendid body of men, keen, athletic and dependable.

Marney wanted to wait until all hope of finding Dighton had vanished or until he had joined him in the lane and they were able to get away together. That was the little American's personal wish. However it might have appeared to an outsider, it was duty to the country he had elected to serve that prompted his headlong flight. To have lost so valuable a man as Dighton was bad enough; for Taverner to have lost two agents in a single night would have been a tragedy.

A quarter of a mile from the villa, with the leashed hounds still barking in the distance, and the voices of the guardians of the law inaudible, he sat down

at the foot of a tree, gulping for breath. There was something strangely familiar about the spot, and presently, as his breathing became more normal and he was able to think rationally, he recognised the low hedge opposite and the gap in it through which Dighton and he had passed when the real raiding-party came up the lane.

He was safe here, he thought. He was beyond the zone of operations for a time at least. He would smoke in the shelter of the bushes and wait. Dighton, if he came at all, was almost bound to retreat that way.

He had brought out that amazing wallet of his and was in the act of selecting a cigar when something made him tuck the thing away quickly and skulk into the blackest patch of shadow he could find. A man was running down the path with the speed and awkward gait of a stampeding rhinoceros. Marney recognised him in an instant; it was the taller of Dopmann's colleagues, hatless, dishevelled and more breathless than he himself had been.

He stopped dead opposite Marney and pressed a hand to his side.

"*Ach! Himmel!*" he muttered and looked round him for cover.

By an awkward stroke of chance he chose Marney's patch.

The American might have been part of the hedge and the other did not see him. Dropping on his hands and knees, he crawled inwards until hot fingers

touched Marney's face. At this sudden contact the German sprang back on all fours like a frog, uttered a blood-curdling yell and continued his wild stampede into the night.

A less experienced man would have joined in the panic; but Marney remained where he was. He had conceded more than he cared about to duty—now he was going to let his personal feelings have a turn. The search-party might have heard that yell—and they might not. There was a lot of noise going on up there still. He hoped that the sole remaining German was keeping the police as occupied as he had the dogs.

He drew out the case again, found a *Toscano* and lit-up.

He felt better with that cigar between his lips, more sanguine at any rate. He remembered Dighton's luck on other occasions, remembered how miraculously he had come through the adventure in Park Lane and his experience of *The Lizard* in Paris. He knew for a fact that he carried one of Ahlborg's new-fangled weapons; he had seen him use it on the batch of dogs that had attacked him in the drive. If he had been equally successful in subsequent encounters with the hounds, the police were going to find him a hard problem to tackle.

Smoking thoughtfully, with every sense alert, Marney waited.

A belt of white, mist, thicker than when they had left the town, hung midway between the earth and

the tree-tops. He turned up his collar and buttoned it across his throat. The air was growing colder. A rat crept across the path within ten feet of him, and he hastened its movements with a well-directed lump of green moss.

Something told him that raids on the *Villa Sabino* would be a thousand times more difficult after this. In spite of his murderous activities, he still admired the skill and daring with which Dopmann's stunt had been launched. But for the chance interference in his plans by Dighton and himself, the thing would have had a successful issue. From Dopmann's point of view, it was bad luck; but Dopmann was dead, and the question of luck no longer concerned him. For a second time in Marney's experience the occupants of the villa had been caught napping. The dogs should have warned them; but the dogs barked at everybody who passed, and probably they had become inured to this and over-confident. It was unlikely they would make such a mistake for a third time.

Ahlborg's hidden gun, employed apparently with reluctance, had been horribly effective. It had accounted for Dopmann. For all Marney could tell, it might have included his absent colleague in its scope.

Considering that vivid ray, he wondered if the drive would be stained blue on the morrow, if the white stone pillars would be tinged with it and the bordering shrubs wilted. Modern science was all very

well in its way, but it had its limits. A man like Ahlborg ought to be put into a lethal chamber or, better still perhaps, pulverised with his own invention before it was utterly destroyed by people acting in the interests of humanity.

A renewed wave of optimism suggested that even this atrocity might have an antidote. Most other things had. The zeppelins that bombed London were beaten in the end; anti-aircraft artillery became a menace to hostile flying machines; gas-masks reduced the terrors of poison-gas. It sounded all right, he conceded, but supposing a war broke out tomorrow and Ahlborg's blue dope was employed. They'd have to hurry over their antidote or half the world would be wiped out before an attempt could be made to combat it.

His legs were getting cramped and he shifted them.

A glance at his watch told him that it was after midnight. He would give Dighton another ten minutes and then make his way back to the Via Emilia. It would scarcely be safe to stop any longer: Some of the police might drift down to the town on foot, and this was undoubtedly the shortest cut.

Yes, he decided, jerking back his thoughts to Dopmann, that fellow had had the luck of the deuce. If Dighton and himself had postponed their investigations until the following evening, Dopmann would be alive at that moment, possibly triumphant. He had struck the same trouble which haunted all of them. There were too many interests involved, too

many people hanging around with the same object in view. Langley had found that out, and Corlitt. It wasn't a clear issue between two parties, but a definite goal on one side and a host of hidden competitors on the other. If you got away with your booty, it was a hundred to one it would be taken from you before you could instal it in a place of safety. He tried to define a place of safety—and failed. The study at the top of Taverner's secret stairs had hardly proved a safe hiding-place.

He sat up with a jerk and jabbed his cigar out in the damp grass. Something was moving stealthily on the far side of the opposite hedge.

His attention became riveted on that gap. A branch swang back into place and a bird, disturbed in its roosting-place, flew screeching into the darkness.

A figure appeared between the bushes, a form half-screened by the belt of mist so that it appeared to have head and feet but no body.

Marney's heart stood still.

At first glance he thought it was a *carabiniere*, because of the thing that looked something like a rifle and poked up into the darkness above the newcomer's head. The next instant he was on his feet, stumbling impetuously forward.

"*Dighton!*"

The figure started.

"Hullo!" came the familiar voice. "Is that you, Marney?"

"Sure it's me. Who the hell did you think it was?"

He had grabbed the other's hand and was shaking it like a pump-handle.

"So you've got it?"

Dighton pressed a weary hand to his forehead.

"Marney," he declared, "I've done more than that; I've got *both*!"

"*Both*!"

"Yes, the pocket affair and this damned arrangement on a tripod. Lord! but I've had a deuce of a bad half-hour! They'd tied up the dogs, thank heaven! but the place was seething with police. I had to knock one of 'em on the head from behind before I could get away. Decent looking chap, too."

Marney, his legs set wide apart, surveyed the other with a look of undisguised admiration.

"Hell!" he ejaculated presently; "you're a cracker jack!"

"I'm damn thirsty!" said Dighton.

Marney relieved him of the heavier burden.

"We'll beat it," he returned; "beat it right now. Better head for my place. You can get a clean-up there and there's always liquor handy."

They made off down the path which led towards the *Casino* and the sea.

Chapter XXI

MARNEY opened the shop-door with the key he carried and motioned to Dighton to follow him in.

"Don't make more noise than you can help," he whispered. "Fontanelli's all right ; but his neighbours are apt to be curious."

He propped the apparatus in the nearest corner and switched on the light.

"Now, look here, Dighton," he whispered. "I don't want to push you out, but your game's to doll yourself up the best you can and get back to the hotel. The police'll be getting active presently and they'll be watching all foreigners."

The other had dropped into a chair, without troubling to remove his waterproof.

"They won't worry their heads about us," he returned. "They caught one of the *Boches* while I was there. That and the remains of old Dopmann ought to satsify them as to the nationality of the invaders."

Too weary to fill his pipe, he found a cigarette and tapped it on his thumb.

"The odd thing is, Marney, that only two people actually saw me in the *Villa Sabino* and I'll bet you anything you like that neither of 'em would recognise me if they knocked into me in the street. As soon as I'd slammed the front-door on Dopmann, I covered

the lower part of my face with this scarf, pulled my cap well over my eyes and held my gun ready. The first chap I met bolted for dear life up the stairs. Lord! but he was scared! I wanted to burst out laughing. He was a little fellow in horn-rimmed spectacles, with a comic sort of face and little bits of side-whiskers——”

Marney nodded.

“That’d be Gerardo—Ahlborg’s private secretary.”

“That’s more or less what I imagined. The chances were that he’d do one of two things—rouse the rest of the household or flatten out under the first bed until I’d gone. I didn’t wait to see, anyway; I hadn’t time. Mine was a smash, grab and clear-out stunt, and the more panic there was, the more likelihood there was of my pulling it off.”

He exhaled two streams of blue smoke through his nostrils and smiled across at Marney.

“I knew enough about the building to remember that the laboratories were somewhere on the left. The first passage I tried took me almost into the kitchen. A smell of garlic put me wise before I blundered in, so I doubled back on my tracks and chose the only other corridor that offered. There was a door at the far end, painted white with yellow finger-marks all round the handle and the lock. I knew I was on the right track then; it smelt right! The door was locked, so I tapped softly with the butt of my pistol. Nobody putting in an appearance, I tapped a bit louder—and quite suddenly the thing

opened about six inches and a head came round. I gave that a rap too, before the fellow could draw it back again. I hadn't much bother after that. I suppose you didn't notice any blue smoke curling out of anywhere while I was inside? You see, I had to fire off one round to see if the pocket-brand of Ahlborg's gun were loaded or not. I had to take my chance with the other. Somehow it didn't look the sort of thing one would muck about with in a drawing-room!"

The other uncorked the cognac and poured some into a glass. He passed it across to Dighton.

"Get that down you," he recommended. "Meantime I'll see what the Signora Fontanelli's left on the kitchen stove in the shape of hot water."

He disappeared for ten minutes, reappearing with an enormous iron saucepan which emitted clouds of steam.

"The Signora believes in constant hot water," he declared, pausing in the middle of the floor. "Failing any other method of getting it, she leaves the fire banked up and every available receptacle full of fluid and near enough to get some heat. You'd better wash in here, by the way; you'll find towels and all that sort of thing, and there's a clothes-brush on the table by the window."

Dighton was glad of that wash.

He rejoined Marney presently, pink-faced and more or less respectable.

"What are we going to do with those trophies?" he queried, pointing to the weapons in the corner.

"Well," said Marney, clasping his hands behind him and sucking at his gold teeth, "there's a pretty useful cupboard under the coals in Fontanelli's cellar. I guess they'd better stop there. Judging by the show of force we saw up the hill to-night, I should say the authorities will be taking this raid fairly seriously. It'll be risky getting anything out of Rapallo until the excitement's died down."

Dighton nodded.

"And after that——?"

"When things are a bit quieter I'll drive over to Genoa one evening in a hired car and fix up with our people there to have the things forwarded to Taverner."

"How'll they go?"

Marney shrugged his shoulders.

"By boat from Genoa to Southampton, maybe—or an Embassy messenger may have to smuggle them through with the rest of his confidential junk."

Dighton looked thoughtful.

"I suppose there's no chance of smuggling them to London myself?"

"You can take it from me, Dighton, you wouldn't have an earthly. No, sir; your job's to go on just as you've been going on. You've got to dance, attend all the lawn-parties you're asked to, make love to Mafalda and behave yourself generally as if you'd never heard of Ahlborg's blue dope."

The adventurer had pulled on his coat again and was preparing to make his departure.

"You think then," he yawned, "that Taverner intends keeping me here indefinitely?"

"Why, sure."

"I mean—there doesn't seem such an awful lot more to do——"

Marney crossed the room and rested a hand on the other's shoulders.

"That was a mighty fine bit of work of yours to-night," he said, "and Taverner'll be the first to appreciate it. But we're not through the wood by a long chalk. It's one thing to know what the explosive is—and another to find out what's going to happen to it."

"Looks like being a slow business."

Marney pursed up his lips.

"Oh, I don't know. Things have livened up now, and I see no reason why they should drop off. When someone actually looks like buying the invention, that's when the fur will begin to fly!"

Dighton grinned.

"All right, old son," he called back from the shop. "I'll take your word for it. The only idea I've got at the back of my mind at this moment is *bed*! Night-night, Marney!"

"So-long, Dighton! Er—keep away from here for a day or two, if you don't mind."

"Right you are. I follow."

He waved a hand and started off with rapid strides towards those few palm-trees of which the other had spoken earlier.

The night-porter of the hotel performed also the duty of lift-attendant. A queer, white-faced creature, of habitually saturnine expression, he flashed a disturbing look at Dighton as soon as the gate had been pulled across.

"We have been looking for you everywhere, *Signore*," he declared with a suddenness that made Dighton start.

"Not really?"

"*Veramente, Signore*. A visitor was here for you a little while back—wanting you *urgentissimo*!"

Dighton bit his lip.

The only people he knew of who might be likely to ask for him where the *carabinieri*—and, whatever the circumstances, it was never a pleasant thing to be sought for by the police. A happy thought struck him. Police were patient people; if they had called and found him out—they would almost certainly have stopped until he returned.

"What was the gentleman like?" he queried, as the elevator drew to a standstill at the third floor.

The fellow shook his head and smiled a significant smile.

"It was not a gentlenan, *Signore*, but a lady."

"A lady! not really!"

The attendant smiled again.

"It was a lady nevertheless, *Signore*. She came in several times between half-past-ten and midnight, and it was difficult to persuade her that you were not here."

Dighton pushed a note into the porter's hand.

"It was the Signorina Pasquali, of course?"

The other shook his head slowly from side to side.

"No, Signore."

"What was her name?"

"She refused to leave her name."

Dighton frowned at his own reflection in the mirror at the far side of the elevator.

"A young woman?" he asked at length.

"Quite young, *Signore*."

"And you are certain in your own mind that it was not the Signorina Pasquali?"

"Perfectly. I had never set eyes on her before."

"She left no message?"

"She said she would be calling here to-morrow morning between ten and eleven."

Dighton was too tired to inquire any further as to the identity of the mysterious female. He had an appointment with Mafalda, he remembered, at ten fifteen—and Mafalda was inclined to be punctual.

Five minutes after putting his boots outside he was fast asleep and he did not stir until the chamber maid knocked with his accustomed continental breakfast.

Chapter XXII

ACCORDING to fixed custom, Dighton had his breakfast in his room, but he did not have it in bed. Coffee and rolls, adequate as they became when one had drilled oneself to follow the customs of the country, could hardly be raised to the dignity of a meal, and were therefore accorded scant ceremony.

He ate as he dressed, and these two functions rolled into one occupied him the best part of an hour.

Parsons, a florid man with a startling array of plus-four suits and a totally misplaced belief in his own powers as a lady-killer, encountered him on the stairs with a suggestion that they should stroll together to Santa Margherita. He had been sunning himself on his balcony, it transpired, and found it to be a wonderful morning—quite like summer.

The idea of a walk appealed to Dighton, but he reserved his decision until later in the morning. He wanted to think—and his movements in these days were more or less regulated by Mafalda.

Quite apart from this, he was more than a little curious to discover who his fair visitor of the night before might be.

Eluding Parsons in the hall, he repaired to a flight of white steps extending from the first floor to the garden. Sitting bareheaded in the sunshine, he ran over a list of his feminine acquaintances in his mind.

It was not Mafalda; the night-porter had been most emphatic about that. It was highly improbable that any of the local residents of his acquaintances would have called on him alone at so late an hour. By a rapid process of elimination he reduced it to either Mdlle. Rollin, in need of a loan to assist her on her trip to Bordighera, or someone from Taverner with an important communication. This last appearing the most probable solution of the mystery, he decided to await her coming at all costs.

There being nothing more to elucidate in that quarter, he turned his thoughts to the *Villa Sabino* and the exciting events of the previous night. The stunt had been a howling success, a sudden inspiration rather than an attack according to plan. If they had planned it, it might easily have ended in failure. He chuckled audibly. That barging-in on Dopmann's preserves struck him as being distinctly humorous. The German had done all the donkey-work, timed everything to a nicety—only to be cheated of a well-earned victory by a rank-outsider!

Smoking there in the sunshine, with the dusty road showing between clumps of foliage, glimpses of the Casino garden and the sea, it was difficult to believe that, less than a dozen hours before, he had been fighting a single-handed battle against odds so overwhelming that the mere memory of them set him shuddering. The unknown defensive resources of Ahlborg's staff, the pack of hungry Alsations, that devastating ray that had lit up the garden and over-

taken Dopmann before he could reach the gates—and that final cordon of *carabinieri*!

According to every known law, he ought to be dead by now—shot in the *Villa Sabino*, torn to pieces or pulverised by that ghastly gun. Yet, here he was, sitting up and taking nourishment, not a whit the worse for what he had gone through.

If he were tackled concerning his movements he might certainly have difficulty in establishing an *alibi*; but the police must be convinced by now that the raid had been in German interests, and were not likely to offend their foreign visitors by interrogating them all in turn.

Mafalda knew his fondness for those steps.

He saw her presently in the garden, a neat, rather startling figure in black and white with a collar of white fur fastened at her throat.

"I have a bone to pick with you," she began a little petulantly. "You deserted me last night, and I was condemned to dancing three times with that fat creature!"

He made room for her on the step beside him.

"A thousand pardons, *Signorina*," he said, drawing on his imagination. "I looked in at the ballroom just after dinner, but did not see you. Thinking that perhaps you were not coming, I wrote some letters in my room."

She made a little grimace.

"It was a disappointing evening altogether. A telephone message came for Karl, just when I was

planning sending you a note, and he insisted on dragging me back with him. There was trouble at the villa last night. Thieves broke in and stole something, and he is like a bear with a sore head just now."

She shot a glance at him and burst out laughing.

"You should have heard him at breakfast this morning! It was really too ridiculous! He threw a roll at poor Gerardo's head because he coughed while he was talking. The place was full of spies; he could trust nobody. From the way he looked at me, you would have supposed that *I* was the adventuress who was finding out his secrets and selling them to his enemies!"

She moved to a step higher than Dighton and began playing with his hair in a manner that set his nerves on edge.

"And so," she resumed, "as a punishment for my perfidy, I am condemned to accompany him to Genoa this morning in the car. On a beautiful day like this, too! And I had counted on spending it with *you*!"

"Lord!" ejaculated Dighton; "what a beastly shame!"

He had to say this; it was the sort of thing Mafalda expected him to say, and there were still many reasons why he should continue this rather tiresome intrigue. He had succeeded in obtaining admittance to the villa without her, but a time might come when a second visit was imperative. There was always

the chance that one or other of those purloined weapons might vanish on their journey to England. As Marney had said, they were by no means through the wood yet.

The ardour of her impetuous love-making was beginning to pall on him. In his heart of hearts he was elated at the prospect of a respite—anxious, too, to get her out of the way before the arrival of his other visitor.

“What time are you starting?” he queried presently.

Mafalda came to her feet.

“At eleven—and I have shopping to do before that. I dare not ask you to come with me while he is in this mood. In a few days, perhaps, he will have forgotten. *Ebbene*, I must go now. To keep Karl waiting to-day is as much as my life is worth!”

He accompanied her as far as the garden.

It would not do to appear too eager to get rid of her. She had more jealousy in her system than any woman he had met, and seemed to live in constant expectancy of a rival in his affections. Still it was imperative she should leave within the next few minutes.

Parsons, in his lavender plus-fours, appearing unexpectedly at the top of the flight, all but extricated him from a position that was getting momentarily more awkward.

“Oh, there you are!” he bellowed. “I’d almost given you up. What about our walk to Santa Margherita?”

Mafalda, indifferent to the stranger's gaze, took both Dighton's hands and allowed her dark eyes to rest on his.

"*Addio, caro,*" she whispered. "I leave you to your men and your walks. You will think of me sometimes, dear?"

The colour faded from her cheeks, and her gaze, become suddenly cold, moved from him to another figure that had emerged from the glass doorway above.

It was some seconds before Dighton noticed the change. Following the direction of her gaze, he saw Greta, transported unexpectedly from London to Rapallo, returning Mafalda's challenge.

"Hullo, Alan!" she called.

Mafalda shot a glance at him, so full of conflicting emotions that it left him troubled, and hurried away through the trees.

Parsons was obliterating himself too, though rather more slowly. His parting wink, broad and significant as it was, did not serve to improve Dighton's humour.

Chapter XXIII

GRETA!

When endeavouring to discover the identity of the visitor of the night before, it had never occurred to him that it might be she.

He swore softly to himself as he went up.

Under any other circumstances he would have been wildly delighted. Their love-affair had been so pitifully short; he had not dared to dream that they would meet again so soon.

"Greta! by all that's wonderful!"

"Hullo, Alan," she said again. "How are you?"

Avoiding her gaze, he drew her to a secluded corner in the hotel lounge.

"Why on earth didn't you tell me you were coming?"

"My dear, I simply couldn't. Daddy cabled that he was ill and wanted to see me, and I started off at a moment's notice. I oughtn't to have stopped off here really."

He bit his lip.

"And you got here last night?"

"Yes."

He struck the palm of his hand with his clenched fist.

"And to think of a whole precious evening—wasted because I was out!"

She eyed him curiously.

"You're quite sure it was wasted, Alan?"

"Why yes, of course——"

"You weren't spending it, by any chance, with the charming lady I saw you with just now?"

He had expected this thrust, but it made him wince just the same. There was an explanation needed here—an explanation which he knew that he could not give. He had been cock-a-hoop a few minutes ago, as bucked as anything over that raid—and now Fate had trotted in Greta at the wrong moment to draw a shadow over everything. Inwardly he cursed Taverner and his schemes. It was Taverner—her own uncle—who had chosen him for this Lothario stunt—and the galling thing of it was that he couldn't look to him to get him out of it. No woman in her senses was going to believe that an intrigue with Mafalda Pasquali was part of his day's work!

"No," he returned steadily, "I was out walking with an American. Why didn't you leave your name with the night-porter?"

"I wanted it to be a surprise for you."

A break in her voice suggested the proximity of tears. He caught her hands before she could withdraw them from his reach.

"Greta," he whispered, "I want you to listen to me. Do you remember my warning you in London how difficult things might be? When I tell you that that woman means nothing more to me than that

table, I want you to try and believe me. I'd explain the whole thing to you now, only——"

He glanced down at his fingers for inspiration.

"Only what, Alan?" she insisted.

"Only—I can't. I—I daren't explain, Greta. I can't put it any clearer to you than that."

He made her look at him.

"Look here, old thing," he continued with a touch of sternness, "it's no use bothering your pretty head over matters you don't understand. I haven't changed one iota since I saw you in London. You haven't—and never will have—a serious rival on this earth. I'm afraid you've got to be satisfied with that. It's asking a lot, I know, but I still ask you to trust me——"

A faint smile hovered on her lips.

"I do trust you," she protested. "I've been trusting you all along, in face of things that would have sent most girls hurrying to Rome without bothering to see you at all. As soon as I had fixed up at an hotel near the station, I came straight here—and found you out. I called about a dozen times last night, until I should think they were sick of the sight of me—and I was sick of hearing the same answer. When at last I got to bed I'll admit my loyalty to you was a little *frayed*. And then, on top of it all, to find you this morning in the arms of a bewitching Italian!"

Dighton grinned.

"Hardly in the arms!" he put in hurriedly.

"Well, holding hands then! Is she frightfully nice, Alan?"

He made an impatient gesture.

"My dear girl, I assure you I don't care two hoots for her."

Greta pouted.

"I don't think I should have minded so much—if she hadn't been so pretty!"

He held out his case to her.

"Please have a cigarette and change the subject. We've lost so much time already that it seems a pity to waste any more of it quarrelling. When do you go to Rome?"

"This afternoon."

"As soon as that?"

She nodded.

"I'm afraid so. I'm not supposed to be here at all, you know. Uncle doesn't know I've come, and Daddy's never heard of you."

"I'll tell you what," said Dighton; "we'll drive to Portofino by the coast road, lunch at a topping little *albergo* I know on the way—and come back in time to settle-up and catch the afternoon train."

Greta flushed.

"It sounds frightfully attractive. Do we start now?"

"Rather! I'll order a car."

He sprang to his feet and made for the door, just as Parsons, carrying two sticks and two caps, blundered into the room.

"I say, Dighton; what about that walk to Santa Margherita?"

The other shook his head.

"Afraid it's off for to-day, old son," he said. "We'll try and work it in to-morrow if you're game."

He took Parsons by the arm and dragged him across to Greta.

"This is my fiancée—Miss Haye," he explained. "Greta, I'm leaving Mr. Parsons to keep you amused while I interview the blokes in the office."

"How d'you do," murmured Greta.

"Pretty fit, thanks," returned Parsons placidly. "I'm fearfully sorry to hear you propose marrying *that!*—Not a bad sort of chap in his way, I admit, but I've known better!"

"Parsons," shouted Dighton from the door, "I'll murder you when I get back!"

"All right, old dear!" came the ready response. "Only don't be in too much of a hurry!"

There were several people around the desk when Dighton got down, and it was ten minutes before he could get anyone to attend to him. There followed a series of irritating delays. The number was engaged; a family of English people, changing from another hotel, wanted rooms; an old lady complained of the working of her radiator.

Moving over to the rack, with the car still unordered, he discovered a letter there, addressed to himself—a small, buff envelope, without stamp or postmark, bearing his full name correctly typed.

Another of those sinister reminders from *The Lizard* !

He knew what it was as soon as he felt it. He had wondered how long it would be before that disturbing personality became active again.

A clerk came out of the office and touched his arm.

"Your car will be here in five minutes, *Signore*."

Dighton thanked him and went up.

A premonition of disaster came to him before he opened the door.

The table at which they had been sitting was empty. Between this and the glass door which opened on to the steps he almost tripped over a prostrate form in lavender *plus-fours*.

And Greta had vanished completely.

Chapter XXIV

GRETA had gone.

There was no need for Dighton to rack his brains to discover through what agency she had disappeared. *The Lizard* must have been in the hall at the same time as himself, have placed that envelope in the rack and gone straight up the stairs to carry out this prearranged plan while Dighton was ordering the car.

The sheer daring of this daylight outrage staggered him. It made him wonder if the news of her father's illness had been part and parcel of this kidnapping scheme. Taking into consideration the swiftness with which her preparations for this lightning visit had been made, he could not imagine in what way this king of crooks could have obtained knowledge of her movements, unless he was instrumental in planning them.

There was no reason why *The Lizard* should be interested in Greta. It was so obviously a scheme to get even with himself, to avenge those incidents in Taverner's study and on the sea-shore; possibly even a ruse to lure him from the neighbourhood of the *Villa Sabino*.

With scarcely a look at the prostrate Parsons, he ran through the glass doorway to the top of the stone steps on which he had had his last interview with Mafalda. He found no sign of movement there or in the garden below.

Glancing back through the doorway, he saw someone enter the lounge from the landing—a waiter with glasses on a tray, drinks that Parsons had probably ordered.

He stepped back into the room and snatched up his cap.

"*Cameriere*," he shouted breathlessly, "there has been trouble here. The Signor Parsons has been injured and I can find no trace of the lady who was with him. You'd better get him to his room and telephone for a doctor."

The man dropped his tray on the nearest table and approached the fallen Englishman timidly.

"*Dio !*" he ejaculated and spread out his hands.

Dighton left him dithering on the carpet and descended the flight three steps at a time.

The fact that Greta had been taken without any noise of a struggle penetrating to the hall astounded him. He could only assume that *The Lizard* had drugged her.

Almost at the foot of the steps he came to a halt abruptly and went back to pick up a woman's shoe that he had almost overlooked in his haste. It was a plain, fawn-coloured shoe with a single strap, and he believed it to be one of the pair he had seen Greta wearing.

He had thrust it into a pocket, and was starting off again when his attention was attracted to a strip of the road which led downhill to the town. Not twenty yards beyond the arcade he saw a yellow touring car, with hood up and number-plate partly obliterated, in the act of starting away. There was

something curious about that car: A small group of Italians had gathered on the pavement, looking at it. It was simpler to attract a crowd in Italy than in probably any other country in Europe; but even Italians refrain from collecting in a body to view a perfectly normal automobile pursuing its normal course.

As Dighton emerged from the garden, the car jerked to a sudden halt and a man in a grey hat peered behind him from under the hood.

Dighton started.

It was grey velour of just that shade that he had noticed in London and in Paris. There were grey hats in Rapallo too, worn by quite respectable people, but generally speaking black was the popular shade. It was imperative that he should do something instantly, take some definite action to rescue Greta from the danger which threatened her. Because of the crowd, the coincidence of the hat and the promptings of some mysterious sixth sense which came uppermost in a crisis, he decided to follow that car.

A second car was halted by the hotel steps, an imported American affair with faded grey-green paint work and the general outward appearance of a vehicle let out for hire. It was probably not the car Dighton had ordered, but he climbed in nevertheless.

An olive-faced youth in a check cap surveyed him doubtfully from the driver's seat.

"You are the Signor Parker, *Signore?*"

Dighton unearthed a hundred-lire note.

"My name is Dighton," he explained hurriedly.

"I have just ordered a car from your firm. Probably it will roll up in a couple of minutes—and the Signor Parker can take it instead."

He pointed to a cloud of white dust at a bend in the road.

"What have you got under that bonnet?—Six cylinders?"

"*Si, Signore.*"

"Can you catch that car in front?"

The driver shrugged his shoulders and spread out a pair of singularly unclean hands.

"*Chi lo sa, Signore?* One can but try!"

He pocketed the note and threw the chugging engine into first. In an incredibly short space of time he had put her in top—and the augmented group of gaping wayfarers saw the car jerk forward with an ever-increasing velocity that impelled them to watch it out of sight.

The youth was quite evidently proud of his 'bus, as proud as a merchant-skipper of his ship or an old-time coachman of his horses.

"A wonderful engine, *Signore*," he yelled in Dighton's ear. "There is not another to equal it in Rapallo."

Dighton nodded to show that he had heard. The pleasing purr of the engine had told him all he wanted to know concerning her mechanical possibilities.

His eyes were fixed on the road ahead.

"What are her tyres like?"

The Italian drew down the corners of his mouth and gesticulated with one hand.

"Not too good, eh?"

"*Così-così!*"

Dighton grunted.

The olive-complexioned boy was not so confident in his tyres as in his engine—and this was a make of car in which tyre-changing was a tedious business. A delay of ten minutes might mean losing sight of their quarry altogether. He would have to chance that.

At the eastern extremity of the town the other vehicle was fifty yards ahead of them. There was evidently nothing wrong with *her* engine either, for she took the first hill without any appreciable drop in speed.

Dighton passed over a cigarette, which the youth accepted with a grin and ignited with practiced skill.

"An Italian car that, *Signore*," he volunteered in strident, lisping Genoese, "*Marca Italiana*—made in Turin.—A doctor's car perhaps.—They picked up a lady who had fainted.

Dighton drew in a deep breath.

Then he was on the right track, after all! As the miles totalled themselves up on the speedometer, the expression on his face grew less set. They were not gaining much ground, but at any rate they were holding their own. Provided the tyres held out, he was prepared to back this heavier car on the level. There was consolation in the memory that, in dashing from Rapallo after Greta's abductor, he was in no sense leaving his post. True enough, the *Villa Sabino* was his main objective; but it was equally important that *The Lizard* should be run to earth. While that desperado was tearing over the

countryside with Dighton at his heels, he could not be exploring the murky recesses of Fontanelli's cellar!

He was growing to like that little driver, to thank his stars he had not been condemned to argue with an older man. An old-stager might have demurred. It was no small thing to be called out for a leisurely local drive—and be switched off with no satisfactory explanation on to a wild dash into infinity!

The mentality of Dante Brizzolesi—Dighton had discovered his name—was both interesting and curious. Englishmen were reputed to be capable of mad adventures such as these—and they were accustomed to pay generously for their pleasures. The *Signore*, besides, had inquired as to the capabilities of his car—and he was glad of an opportunity to demonstrate them. Dighton tried to imagine the attitude of a London taxicab driver towards a similar stunt proposed in halting English by a foreigner.

A road under repair between Chiavari and Lavagna reduced the distance between the two cars to a bare twenty yards. Beyond this obstruction, however, the forward driver accelerated, increasing the distance so visibly that Dighton shouted aloud. Dante, in the midst of igniting his third cigarette, grinned from ear to ear and pressed down his foot. For a fraction of a second the car seemed to leave the road altogether and the headlong race of two vehicles through Lavagna caused startled peasants to scuttle to the roadside for safety. The wind from Dighton's car sent a soldier's cap spinning from his head into the

air, and a *carabiniere* on point-duty waved wildly after them until he was lost to view. At Sentri Levante their quarry took the road that led abruptly inland.

The sky had become overcast; they were meeting a chill north wind and an endless succession of tremendous hills. Dighton was beginning to wish he had brought a coat or that they had thought to raise the hood before starting. Every patch of flints in the road increased his anxiety for those tyres and, as this test of endurance continued, he leaned more and more to the conviction that *The Lizard* was playing with them.

The car in front seemed to reduce or increase the distance between them as it chose. In the midst of a long ascent the imperturbable Dante breathed something about *benzina*!

This was a hint of a calamity for which he had not banked. They were running short of petrol!

Dighton gritted his teeth. The business was beginning to look hopeless. The rôle of passenger was getting on his nerves. He did not doubt for one moment that the other knew his car, that he was getting the utmost out of her, but he felt somehow that he could do better. But for the time that would be wasted in a change of seats, he would have counselled a stop and prevailed upon the other to vacate his seat at the wheel.

Dante seemed to divine his thoughts, for he announced confidently:

"*Pazienza, Signore!* We shall pass him presently!"

He spoke as if he thought Dighton was doing this for a wager.

The near front wheel bumped over a jagged splinter of rock and he groaned inwardly.

The road dipped into a hollow and rose again, with a wall of rock on the one side and a sheer drop on the other. To cap everything it began to rain.

Dighton felt heavy drops of moisture sinking through to the skin. A burst of hail peppered the driving-screen and he sat forward in his seat, ducking his head.

"*Sfortunato!*" muttered Dante, glancing back at frayed upholstery gleaming with moisture. As if to relieve his feelings at this fresh annoyance, he jabbed on that last bit of acceleration.

At that moment the unexpected happened.

The rear tyre of *The Lizard's* off-wheel burst with an explosion which drifted to Dighton's ears like the tapping of two planks together. The front car dry-skidded to the very edge of the abyss, slowed appreciably—and Dante's car, thundering up on the near side, just failed to miss it.

Dighton, shielding his face instinctively, was aware of a harsh splintering of glass, the shrieking of swiftly applied brakes and the sickening jar as the two vehicles collided.

He caught a series of confused impressions—of the other car dropping into space, of his driver throwing up his hands and their own mad charge up the left bank. And then his entire universe became topsyturvey. They were heeling over backwards with six cylinders of throbbing machinery coming down on top of them. . . .

Chapter XXV

DIGHTON had somehow got it firmly fixed in his mind that he was dead!

Everything, in fact, seemed to point to it.

He was conscious of a vague sensation of floating through space, suspended on a cloud perhaps as soft and billowy as cotton-wool or drifting on wings with which he had in some miraculous manner become endowed.

Something inside his head kept opening and shutting like a lid, giving periods of utter darkness interspersed with glimpses of a sky of infinite azure. He was neither conscious of pain, nor anxiety nor even regret. So numbed had his body become, that he was convinced that he had left it battered under that hulk of drumming machinery, and that his spirit, deprived of what he now regarded as an intolerable burden, was being borne by some mysterious Destiny towards the amber gates of Eternity.

The impressions became more distinct. Bells, myriads of bells, all sounding the same jangling note, struck upon his ears, an incessant, monotonous noise that brought with it a feeble sense of irritation.

The numbness was wearing off.

Gradually, as a score of separate aches made themselves felt at once, the floating sensation vanished. Something shaggy and fourfooted blundered into

him without seeing him and began cropping grass within inches of his left ear. Hardly conscious of what he was doing, Dighton stretched out an arm and this action began a stampede which set all those accursed bells clanging in unison.

Sheep bells! Mountain sheep feeding on the slopes! He wondered why it had not occurred to him before.

Where was he?

Assured now that he still existed, he wanted to connect up, as it were, his full equipment of limbs with the brain which normally controlled them. A spasmodic, concerted movement disturbed the ruins of a straw and framework shelter upon which apparently he had been lying and he found himself rolling over and over on a stretch of short grass interspersed with rounded boulders. One of these prominences brought him up with a jerk and hastened his return to wakefulness.

It was his head, he discovered, that ached the most.

In five minutes he had propped himself against the boulder and was staring upwards at a spot some fifty feet above him where the overturned, foremost half of a car overhung the cliff.

There had been an accident, he told himself. That impotent mass which comprised bonnet, steering-wheel and a jagged section of glass and which appeared to be on the verge of toppling over on to him, had fallen like that as the result of a burst tyre or

collision and had tipped its front passengers into space!

He shook his head and the effort hurt him horribly.

A nasty business that! It came of trusting to Italian drivers: Italian drivers were always reckless. He remembered——

His head seemed to be revolving like a wheel. He clutched at it with both hands.

Suddenly he caught himself laughing at a joke which struck him as being extraordinarily funny. *He* had been one of the occupants of that car! He had gone for a drive somewhere with a little, olive-complexioned Genoese, who smoked cigarettes and boasted about his engine.

He listened intently.

The engine had stopped. They had run out of petrol. He remembered that the boy had murmured something about *mancanza di benzina*. It annoyed him to see the thing projecting like that. He wanted to climb up to it and push it back. From that distance it did not look like a car that weighed several tons!

The sound of water, trickling close at hand, diverted his attention from the car. He located the source of the noise presently—a tiny mountain torrent following a watercourse that looked many sizes too big for it.

He crawled over to it painfully.

It seemed an eternity before he managed to drag himself into a ledge where the constant dripping of

water for centuries had worn a shallow basin in the rock and the falling stream from above formed a natural shower-bath. That cold douche performed miracles for Dighton. Sitting back, with soaked hair and shoulders and all his physical powers drifting back to him, he found his mental equilibrium as well.

He had taken that car at the hotel, and set out in hot pursuit of a second vehicle which he believed contained Greta and *The Lizard*. They had overtaken them at the summit of that escarpment and collided.

. . . The vivid details of the crash were crowding back on him. The other car had pitched clean over, carrying with it its occupants—the driver, the man in the grey velour—and Greta!

Assailed by an awful fear, he scanned the landscape, looking for traces of the others.

His gaze, dimmed by the throbbing of his temples, fell upon a vast green blur, extending from his feet to the far horizon and punctuated by shadowy, wind-blown trees, the campanile of a village church, and a thing like a silver serpent which he knew to be a river.

The picture became clearer. He made out strips of cultivated land, lean, isolated sheep, terraced vineyards—and suddenly, propped against the fantastic trunk of an ancient olive, the wreck of the yellow car.

It lay on its side, with the chassis and all four wheels showing and set at awkward angles on bent

axles like a tin toy trodden on by a clumsy child. The framework of its hood, stripped of the bulk of its covering, gleamed yellowy-white like the ribs of some antidiluvian monster bleaching in the sunshine.

Dighton, bruised and battered himself, felt in sympathy with that crumpled Leviathan. For the first time since his return to consciousness he realised that the storm had blown over. It had passed off as quickly as it had come up, leaving the countryside radiant and smiling.

Very soon now he must get up and examine that car. He was torn between conflicting emotions—desire to learn the fate of the one woman in the whole world he cared about, and fear for what that fate might be. Flesh and blood could not endure what that car had stood. There was Dante Brizzolesi, too, the poor devil who had piloted the other vehicle—and *The Lizard*.

He guessed by the sun that it was afternoon—somewhere between one and two. His watch, when he drew it out with trembling fingers, revealed a circle of starred glass that held in some extraordinary way together and hands absurdly twisted. It did not even tell him at what time the disaster had occurred.

He made six consecutive attempts to rise to his feet—and sank back on each occasion, weak and exhausted. His bones, he believed, were whole, his resolute, indomitable spirit was equally unimpaired;

but his bruised muscles refused to respond. He felt like the sole survivor of a world-wide catastrophe. He shot a glance at the heap upon which he had fallen—the rough shelter of some shepherd which his weight had sent into a state of collapse. He owed his life to the softness of its roof and the rottenness of its timbers. He should have been grateful to it, eternally grateful, but with Greta crushed beyond recognition in the ruins of the car he was not sure that he wanted to live.

He crawled from the torrent on his hands and knees, lighted upon a stake which the same shepherd whose hut he had demolished had possibly discarded, and continued on his staggering, downhill quest like a doddering old man, encountering grim trophies on his way.

He found Dante, sprawling in a bush with his neck broken and chest crushed in by impact with the driving-wheel; a head-light torn from its seating, the upholstered seat of the American 'bus, with canvas torn away to reveal copper springs. Other relics littered the hillside, a rug with fringed ends, a derelict spare wheel and strips of hood-material flapping on the thorn-bushes to which it had become attached.

Quite close to the Italian car he chanced upon a shoe with a single strap—the companion to the one which still remained in the jacket pocket into which he had thrust it a few moments before embarking upon the pursuit. The discovery brought a lump to his throat—and then a wild hope surged within him.

Its presence there seemed to indicate that Greta had fallen from the car before it reached the end of its mad career. By the great ridges scored in the earth he could follow the course it had taken. The shoe was thirty feet to the left of that. There was a remote chance that she had been pitched clear—and yet a further glance at the yellow car showed this to be unlikely. It was far more conceivable that the three occupants had been boxed in by the side-curtains and the framework.

Still grasping the shoe, Dighton walked with surer steps right up to the olive tree.

He had to move round to the other side to look in. The result of his first glance staggered him. The wreckage contained foot-mats, the overturned contents of a picnic-basket, a dented suit-case—but no trace of either of the three bodies he had expected to find!

This was astounding. It hardly seemed credible that four out of five people should have survived such a catastrophe. Judging by the evidence to hand, he believed that the thing had turned over and over down the slope. The hood had offered certain protection no doubt, but for all three to have escaped serious injury was impossible. . . . And yet . . . there was a spot just under the road, a miniature plateau where the car might have paused for an instant—just long enough for a man with *The Lizard's* quickness of vision to have jumped, dragging Greta with him.

Standing there, irresolute, straining his eyes for any sign of movement, he tried to recall details of accidents he had known or of which he had read. Whole trains had been derailed with only a small percentage of casualties. He remembered a lorry during the War on the Asiago making just such a hair-raising plunge—and the driver springing from it on to a tree. Fate played queer tricks on people. Here was he, shaken and tottering, Dante Brizzolesi with a broken neck—while the others, who had encountered what on appearance was the greater disaster, had got off scot-free!

That was how it seemed on the face of it and, for Greta's sake, he hoped it was so. If she had still been under the influence of the drug *The Lizard* had administered at *The Casino*, she might have had a better chance than either of the other two. Unconscious people were often guarded by a special Providence. But he failed to see how the driver had won clear.

A white-metal flask caught his eye, lying in the grass by the foot of the tree. He unscrewed the top and sniffed at the contents suspiciously. Cognac! Marney's particular beverage! He swallowed a mouthful and the raw spirit coursed through his veins like fire. He was feeling better—tons better. It had come to sight just at the moment he had wanted a fillip to nerve him to the effort of a prolonged search.

There were scores of places within easy reach where an injured man might lie hidden. He would

have to proceed warily. He knew nothing about the missing driver; but *The Lizard* might be lying in ambush, waiting for an opportunity of scoring-off Dighton, even if his own end were inevitable.

What worried him most was the time lost while he had been unconscious. An hour at least had passed since the accident. Given that his enemy had survived with a whole skin, he could have carried Greta a fair distance in that time.

His first discovery was made within the first five minutes and served to lift the veil of mystery that hung over the occupants of the yellow car. A queer patch on the grass lower down, which at first sight looked like a long shadow, resolved itself into the sinister blue stain with which he had grown familiar. It was a repetition of the scene in Taverner's study and the tragedy in the Rue des Acacias—only this time the victim was a stranger to Dighton, a man in the tattered remains of a dark overcoat. Slightly beyond the stain he found a cap with a bright peak. He knew then how the chauffeur had ended his journey! *The Lizard* had patched up *The Pocket Death* and employed the last round in the container to obliterate his unfortunate driver.

Reading between the lines, Dighton understood.

The fellow had been injured, too crippled to walk, but not too injured to explain his predicament to anyone who might find him. Obviously *The Lizard* did not trust him out of his sight. He had not trusted Daudot or Mdle. Laroche.

A fit of acute depression seized Dighton as he moved away. What a charnel-house this invention of Ahlborg's was making of the world already! This pleasant hillside, with its herd of sheep, its rippling torrent and rugged scenery, would be avoided by superstitious peasants for years to come, for fear of encountering the phantoms of such harmless creatures as poor Dante and the man who had outdistanced him on the road!

He flung the shepherd's staff from him and swore a solemn oath to the cloudless firmament: When Taverner's order came to wipe out the *Villa Sabino* and the laboratories that turned out that devilish dope, he would carry it out with a good heart. He would stay there until the fumes enveloped him, stay there to ensure that every crucible, every beaker, every glass retort was consumed. It would not be a crime, but a service rendered to humanity.

He came upon *The Lizard* so unexpectedly in a clump of trees by the river that both of them were taken aback.

The other dropped his burden and drew a pistol from his coat, but Dighton had found his own first and was prepared to take no risks. It was a tense moment, tense and dramatic. In that first glance the adventurer learned many things. He knew that Greta lived, knew that she had raised herself on her hands, heard her call to him. There was no time to discover how this miracle had been achieved. All else was obliterated in his mind, eclipsed by the

fact that he had caught *The Lizard* unmasked, had recognised him and understood for the first time the reason for his sudden interest in Greta. The revelation came to him as a shock. It was unbelievable, astounding. . . . It set aside established theories, turned everything upside-down. . . .

His finger sought the trigger a clear second before the other had levelled his gun. He had pulled it three times in rapid succession before he realised that the thing that had barely left his sight had been tampered with.

The Lizard's agents did their work well!

The pistol of the master-crook spoke once and once only. It provoked an agonised scream from the girl and sent Dighton pitching on to his face on the sward.

The last thing Dighton remembered was Marney's voice rasping in his ear—and wondering what the blazes he was doing there.

PART III

Chapter XXVI

ON the night of the day following Greta's departure for Italy Sir Ian Taverner went to the theatre.

It was a rare thing for Taverner to go to theatres, rarer still for him to go alone. As Hodges drove him along Oxford Street he tried to persuade himself that he was taking this unusual step because he was over-worked and needed recreation. The truth of the matter was that he missed his niece and found the palatial flat in Park Lane dull and lonely without her.

Greta had been oddly changed of late. She had been quiet of manner and more settled. There had been none of those frantic searches after something original in dance-frocks, few hastily-consumed meals, no midnight or after midnight returns from those revels that had once made up the greater proportion of her existence. Instead, she had spent her evenings curled up in a big chair by the lounge fire, armed with a book which she rarely read.

Taverner had welcomed this change.

Bachelor though he was, it stirred a home-loving instinct that had long remained dormant. From a date that synchronised curiously with that on which Alan Dighton had embarked on his journey south,

an altered Greta had produced an equally altered Taverner. He had given up working late in his study, forsaken his clubs and dropped quite naturally into the habit of enjoying his after-dinner whisky and cigars in the company of his niece.

It was surprising how pleasant it all was, how much satisfaction could be gained from quiet, uneventful evenings spent within the warm radius of the fire's glow. He felt more rested in these days, more ready for the strenuous activities of the morrow. The change spread to the furnishings of the flat: Those comfortable modern chairs, those priceless antiques that had hugged the walls with a stiffness worthy of a museum, became moved into more convenient positions. In some subtle, inexplicable manner a dead room had become suddenly alive!

The altered state of affairs did not pass unnoticed in the kitchen. The cook remarked on it to Jarrett, and the housemaid, proud in the possession of her seventh young man, claimed that she had divined the reason. If anybody were to ask *her*, she declared, she would reply without hesitation that Miss Greta was in love. Hodges, who was less in demand in these non-dancing days, declined to express an opinion when appealed to by a joint committee of his peers; and yet the same Hodges could have told them a whole lot if he had chosen.

The chauffeur occupied a unique position in the Taverner household, and the one outstanding reason

why he had remained in it for so long was because he did not talk. He was probably the best-paid motor-driver in the metropolis, but the realisation of this fact did not turn his head; it rather increased, if anything, his attitude of respect towards his master and Miss Haye. Hodges knew his place and kept it. Taverner had a knack of getting good people around him and keeping them. He did this without pandering to them or expecting them to lick his boots. As a direct result, the imperturbable Hodges would have gone through fire and water to serve his master. He would have undergone similar ordeals to see his young mistress happily married to Alan Dighton.

On this particular evening Taverner was inclined to be communicative. He spoke to Hodges several times from his lone seat at the back.

"Miss Greta should be well on her way to Rome by now."

"Yes, sir," came the measured reply, "I suppose she should. Seems a long journey for a young lady to travel on her own, sir."

Taverner removed the cigar from his mouth.

"Oh, I don't know, Hodges. Girls do all sorts of extraordinary things nowadays. They've changed a great deal since I was a young man and, in a good many ways, for the better. Continental travelling has altered too. It's really remarkably simple. The heart of the sternest customs officer relents towards a girl with a pretty face."

"Place seems funny without her, I expect," suggested the chauffeur presently.

And there, as it has already transpired, he touched upon the truth.

"It does," said Sir Ian.

He sat, with clasped hands, staring beyond Hodges at an asphalt road gleaming with the moisture left by a recent shower. It was lonely without her, horribly lonely. Hodges's innocent remark set other thoughts in motion: Sooner or later Greta would get married. This brief parting from his sister's child—a matter of a month or six weeks at the most—was nothing in comparison to the loss he would sustain when the time came for him to hand her over to the care of another. It was depressing to look forward to, but it was nevertheless inevitable. Greta was just the sort of girl who would get married.

The car drew to a halt outside the theatre and Taverner got out.

"I shall expect you about eleven, Hodges."

The man touched his cap.

"Very good, sir."

In the brief pause before moving off again to make room for the saloon behind, he watched his master's stocky form passing up the broad steps into the lighted foyer. Taverner was looking older somehow. His stoop had become more pronounced, his steady, leisured gait that of a man ten years his senior.

Moments later the familiar silk hat, the abundance of white silk scarf sticking up above the coat, the

faint haze of cigar-smoke that accompanied the baronet everywhere had vanished into the well-dressed throng, and Hodges was piloting his car homewards.

He reflected sadly, as he crossed the Circus into Piccadilly, that Sir Ian was a very different man from the energetic colonel of infantry under whom he had served during the war. Quite little things seemed to be capable of upsetting his equanimity—the departure of his niece for Italy, for example.

Taverner himself did not enjoy the show.

What he was pleased to term *anno-dominitis* had destroyed for him the lure of shapely legs, of costly scenery and dresses, of intricate lighting-effects. There was nothing about the revue that made him regret missing a whole quarter-of-an-hour of it so that he could drink a whisky in peace before the general rush began. He had heard all the comedian's jokes before, the plot was thin and unsatisfying, the dancing grotesque, and in the main, ungainly.

Between ten and ten-thirty he vacated his end-seat and went down to the hall to telephone.

He called up the flat.

"Is that you, Jarrett?"

The servant's voice, rendered metallic over the line, answered him.

"Tell Hodges to come here for me at once. I shall be waiting for him in the foyer."

"Very good, sir."—A short pause.—"Er—there's nothing wrong, sir, I hope?"

Taverner laughed.

"Nothing whatever, Jarrett, thanks.—I'm rather bored; that's all."

He had removed the receiver from his ear and was on the point of hanging it up when a disturbance in its inner mechanism made him listen again.

"Hullo, Ian!" said a voice which he did not recognise, "How are you?"

Taverner frowned and cleared his throat.

"I'm perfectly fit, thanks all the same.—Who's that speaking?"

A loud bellow of laughter set his ear-drum throbbing painfully.

"Can't you guess?"

"No," he returned coldly, "I'm afraid I can't. I'm not good at guessing."

"Try," implored the voice.

"I don't want to."

"It begins with an *H*——"

"I don't care," retorted Taverner irritably, "if it begins with a *Z*. It conveys absolutely nothing to me."

Again that boisterous bellow of mirth.

"Haye," said the man at the other end of the line. "Haye."

It came to Taverner as an expression of inquiry.

"I remarked that the initial conveyed absolutely nothing to me," he repeated.

"Haye," shouted the other again, "Dick Haye. Now do you know?"

Taverner started and almost dropped the receiver.

Dick Haye—Greta's father—the impoverished artist from Rome!

"What the dickens are you doing over here?"

Haye laughed a shade more quietly.

"You speak as if you were scarcely overjoyed at the prospect of meeting your brother-in-law!"

"On the contrary, I'm delighted. I only wondered—Are you better?"

"Better? How d'you mean? I've never had a day's illness in my life—touch wood! I'm in fine fettle, thanks all the same. Just had a stroke of extraordinary good luck. Got an order to paint six pictures—at a decent figure too——"

The details of his good fortune fell on deaf ears. Taverner was staring at a tremendous enlargement of the comedian who had bored him some minutes before, but he did not take that in either. He was thinking of the cable from Rome purporting to have come from Greta's father—and the trouble he had gone to in getting her away.

"If you were not ill," he demanded presently, "why did you say you were?"

"My dear old idiot, I never did."

"But you must have. We got your wire on Monday evening and I packed Greta off to you by the first boat."

"You *what*?"

"I'm coming home almost immediately," declared Taverner. "There's been a mistake somewhere, and we'll have to sort it out between us."

He hung up the receiver and descended to the cloak-room for his coat and hat.

He was walking up and down on the pavement outside when Hodges came. As the chauffeur pulled open the door the whiteness of his master's face startled him.

"You're quite all right, sir?" he queried anxiously.

"Quite," snapped Sir Ian, "Why shouldn't I be?"

"No reason at all, sir," jerked in Hodges quickly.

"Only I thought——"

Taverner sat down heavily.

They were half-way home when he spoke again.

"I'm afraid I spoke rather sharply to you just now, Hodges. The fact is I was very worried. I've had some disturbing news this evening—and I'm worried about Miss Haye."

Chapter XXVII

DICK HAYE was waiting for him in the drawing-room.

"How are you, Ian?" he cried as the other came in. "It's good to set eyes on you after all this long time. What's this nonsense you were burbling about cables and Greta?"

He had a habit of shouting everything he said, as if he spent most of his existence in a home for the deaf. He was tall and almost incredibly thin, with broad, somewhat stooping shoulders, long, artistic-looking fingers and a lean, bearded face. Taverner had not seen him for upwards of three years—and yet he could have sworn that he was wearing the same suit of brown tweeds, with its baggy knees and pockets that bulged as if he were accustomed to stuff them with his paraphernalia.

"How are you, Dick?"

He motioned the other to sit down.

"I don't quite know what to say about Greta," he continued. "She's gone to Italy right enough. I saw her off myself yesterday morning. I'll let you have a look at that cable presently. It was perfectly clear though. It stated that you were seriously ill and wanted to see her at once."

Haye stroked his beard and glared into the fire.

"Extraordinary!" he muttered; "most extraordinary!—Who was it addressed to?"

"To me—and signed *Dick*."

The other bent forward.

"You're sure that there isn't a boy in the offing?—Although she does happen to be my daughter, Greta's a deucedly pretty girl. They might have planned an elopement. You know what young people are."

Taverner shook his head slowly from side to side.

"It won't wash, Dick," he answered. "Greta's not that kind of girl. I've given her a free hand here, and she's always acted squarely with me. For all I know, she may have her admirers, but I'm prepared to bet you anything she wouldn't stoop to an elaborate plot of this kind to get married. Why should she?"

Haye spread out his hands and dropped them on to his knees.

"It is very remarkable!"

"I should never be surprised," pursued the other, "if Greta walked into my study one fine morning with the announcement that she proposed getting married on the following day. She might be precipitate, but she'd be frank about it nevertheless. No, Dick, I hate to pose as an alarmist, but there's more in this confounded business than meets the eye."

He touched the bell.

"You think so, eh?"

"I'm sure of it. You can bring in the whisky, Jarrett—and tell Mullins to see that Mr. Haye's bed's aired."

He sprang up suddenly and began pacing the room.

"You've more than an inkling, Dick, what my job is. A career of this sort brings one enemies. You could hardly expect it to be otherwise. These enemies are divided into two classes—those who know who I am and those who would like to know. In a general sort of way, these enemies of mine and myself wage a war of mutual hate without actually ever coming into contact with one another. We are the generals, so to speak, and our respective agents serve as cannon-fodder. Our warfare is waged along certain fixed lines and according to certain accepted rules. Occasionally, however, a foe comes into the field who treats these conventions with contempt. And it is a person in this category who, I believe, had spirited Greta away."

The painter sat back in his chair, with his legs crossed and the tips of his long fingers pressed together in front of him.

"And do you mean to tell me my daughter has been kidnapped by——"

"By a fellow styling himself *The Lizard*," said Taverner bluntly.

"Good God!"

There was a brief period of silence while Jarrett brought in the tray and set it down.

"Greta," pursued the baronet, "is due in Rome at eight o'clock to-morrow morning. I'll wire my fellow there to look out for her. I'll let my men in Rapallo know too. They're immediately interested in *The Lizard* and may be in a position to follow him up."

He rang the bell again.

Jarrett appeared in the doorway.

"You rang, sir?"

"Yes; ask Mr. Baird to come in."

"Very good, sir."

A few moments later the door opened, admitting a tall, bronzed, grey-haired man, with a pronounced military bearing.

"I want you to get out two cables in code, Baird, if you don't mind. One is to go to Lamotte at Rome and the other to Marney:—'Miss Haye due Rome Thursday morning eight o'clock. Lizard attempting to kidnap. Do all in your power.' " He glanced at his brother-in-law for approval. "I fancy that should answer our purpose."

Haye nodded.

"I have no suggestions to make."

Taverner looked at Baird.

"We'll get these off as soon as possible. If anything occurs to me before the morning we'll have time to wire again."

"I understand perfectly," said the other—and the door closed softly.

Haye had helped himself to the whisky.

"That's not the chap you had when I saw you last," he remarked.

"No. I—er—I was rather unfortunate with my last secretary. He met with a sudden end, poor chap!"

He did not say what his end had been; he did not want to harrow the other's nerves. Haye was rather



like a volcano in imminent state of eruption. A chance, tactless admission might set him off and there was no stopping him until the fires of his declamatory vehemence had burnt themselves out.

"What makes you think it was this—this *Lizard*, Ian?"

Taverner had returned to his chair.

"I have my reasons."

His non-committal answer evidently annoyed Haye, for he moved restlessly, and two patches of crimson appeared on his cheeks.

"Hang it all, Ian," he burst out; "Greta's my daughter, you know, even though I have shoved the responsibility of her upbringing on to your shoulders. I think you might be more explicit."

Taverner moistened his lips. The crater was sending out smoke already!

"You've got to be patient, Dick," he said. "We're treading on pretty dangerous ground. There are lots of secrets that I am prevented from touching upon, even in the privacy of my family circle. I try to make it a habit not to jump to conclusions. When I said that *The Lizard* had abducted Greta, it was not an effort to be dramatic or even wise. My deduction was based on very solid earth—on a series of events which have happened during recent weeks. *The Lizard* is the only opponent who has ever carried the war into my own territory—into this very flat, in fact. I am as sure as you are sitting opposite me now that this bogus cable, and anything that may

have occurred after its receipt, is the work of a man who cherishes some peculiar grievance against myself."

He took a mouthful of spirit and replaced the glass on the table.

"This fellow was particularly well informed. He knew of the private staircase by which my agents come to visit me from time to time; he had a key to the door which leads from it to my study; apparently he was thoroughly conversant with the movements of my household. It hardly requires a stretch of imagination to assume that he was aware that I had a niece of whom I was very fond. If he desired to hurt me, he could have devised no better way than to kidnap her."

Haye picked a cigar from the box, tested it against his ear, and lit it without troubling to remove the band.

"Who is this *Lizard*, Ian?"

"That is precisely what I am trying to find out."

The cigar had tilted to a truculent angle. Haye only lacked the cap to make him the living image of a famous fictionary skipper.

"But your agents——"

"Could tell you no more about him than I can myself. He is a mystery. We have no very clear idea as to his motives or his ideals, if he has any."

"A pretty dangerous fellow."

"Very!"

"Good Lord!"

Haye shifted his back from one corner of his chair to the other and the furrows on his forehead deepened.

"But hang it all, Ian," he blurted out. "this is horrible, horrible! My daughter—lured from your house by a false wire—fallen into the hands of a ruthless, international desperado of whose identity you are unaware. . . . ! Great heavens, man! what are we going to do? what can we hope to do?"

Taverner blinked.

"We're not certain yet that she has been taken. One of my men may be able to put in an appearance before it is too late." He drew his chair closer to the blaze. "I have a particularly good fellow in Rapallo at this moment, a chap who was my adjutant in the war, and in whom I have the greatest confidence. He has tackled *The Lizard* on two occasions at least, tackled him with his bare fists in face of a new and singularly effective weapon. If we hear no news of Greta in the morning, I'll take him off the job he's on now and instruct him to concentrate on *The Lizard*."

The volcano smote the table with his fist.

"If we hear no news of Greta in the morning," he shouted, "or if we hear bad news of her, I'll fly to Italy myself, even if it costs me every penny I possess to do so!"

Taverner smiled.

"I'm afraid it would all be wasted, Dick. You would be absolutely powerless."

"Damn it all, Ian! I could *try*!"

The other glanced from his brother-in-law to the fire and from the fire to the heavy curtain over the window. Presently he got up and left the room abruptly.

It was ten minutes before he returned.

"What about those pictures, Dick?" he said.

"Those? Oh, they can go hang! I saw the fellow this afternoon and he's not over-particular as to time."

Taverner rubbed his hands together.

"Right you are," he returned. "I suppose we can take that as settled."

Haye gaped.

"Take what as settled?"

"We fly to Italy to-morrow. I've just telephoned the Air Ministry, and they see no reason why it should not be managed."

The volcano had lulled into quiescence. He just flopped back on the cushions with every trace of eruption gone out of him. In common with the majority of his statements, his recent declamation had been purely hot *air*. He had never been in an aeroplane in his life, had never intended to undergo the experience. His life, in fact, was one long succession of poses. When his daughter seemed in danger he had posed as an anxious parent.

"I—er—I suppose it is necessary," he faltered at length. "I mean—the Air Ministry and all that—it's an awful lot of bother—especially if nothing serious has happened."

Taverner smiled again.

"My dear Dick," he retorted, "what on earth use is it to have a relative by marriage who can pull strings, if he doesn't pull 'em sometimes. Your mention of a 'plane gave me an idea. I rather wanted to go to Italy myself. I'd like to see how my chaps are getting on there. I'm allowed a personal servant, you know——"

"Then we fly to Rome to-morrow in any case?"
The other shook his head.

"Not necessarily. Unless I have good reasons to the contrary, our destination will be Rapallo. In which case, I shall be able to instruct Dighton personally."

He clipped off the end of a fresh cigar.

Chapter XXVIII

His trip to Italy by air was a memorable one for Richard Haye.

Aroused from his slumbers by Jarrett at six on a bleak winter's morning, his teeth chattered all the time he was dressing—and the chattering was not entirely due to cold!

Taverner, brisk, alert, changed miraculously in a night from one upon whom the advancing years rested heavily to an active, middle-aged man, hurried him mercilessly through his breakfast in the electrically-lit dining-room.

Long before Haye had finished he was at the window, viewing the approaching day.

"Jove, Dick!" he called across presently; "it's going to be fine—a crisp, clear December day. We shall be well wrapped-up and you'll enjoy every inch of it."

The other murmured something inarticulate in response.

He was by no means certain of being thrilled, at least not in the sense Taverner implied. If there was one sentence he regretted at that moment, it was the one he had uttered in the drawing room on the previous night when he had believed the prospect of flying to be remote. Moral cowardice was the only thing that prevented him from confessing his fear and

backing-out of it. He felt like a man convicted of homicide consuming his last meal on earth.

Climbing into the fuselage of a great, sprawling miracle of modern science after Hodges had driven them to Croydon, with the ground still white with frost and officials with upturned coat-collars in the background, he felt that he was mounting to the scaffold!

The journey was accomplished in three stages, with brief stops at Paris and Dijon. They landed finally, and to Haye's intense relief, on the night-enshrouded flying-ground at Genoa and, a little later, a special car was whirling them at breakneck speed through Nervi.

Throughout the entire flight he had scarcely uttered a word. Fear, genuine, livid fear, had given way to wonderment long before the French Capital had been reached. Between Paris and Dijon he was almost enjoying himself; during the third stage, with certain unexpressed mental reservations, he felt himself to be an accomplished aeronaut. Now that the thing had been thrust upon him, he was glad. What an astounding adventure to relate to his friends in Rome! The thought of the envy with which he would be regarded put the memory of his recent good fortune completely in the shade.

Hitherto he had openly condemned flying as a method of transport; now he was contemptuous of the great multitude that had never sampled this wonderful system. There was nothing in it, he told

himself. You felt as secure up there as you did below—and yet he was not altogether sorry to set his feet on *terra firma* again.

It was Taverner, however, who had kept his self-pride in check. He could not help admiring the calmness with which a man fifteen years older than himself dealt with his correspondence en route, for all the world as if he had been lolling back in the seat of a first-class Pullman. This amazing personality kept in constant touch with his business. Wires were awaiting him at Le Bourget and again at Dijon. At the former he flashed a glance at Haye and pursed up his lips.

“No sign of Greta at Rome, I’m afraid, Dick. Looks rather bad, doesn’t it?”

Halfway between Genoa and Rapallo Haye broke his long silence and talked nineteen to the dozen. He reminded Taverner without shame that it had been his idea from the first, recalled incidents of the journey, raved about the extraordinary colour-schemes he had noticed when flying at a height and eulogised modern science to the tree-tops. He levelled fierce questions at Taverner, and rambled on without waiting for an answer—which perhaps was fortunate, for Taverner was fast asleep!

Taverner registered at the Casino Hotel as *Mr. Gallagher*, the name in which his passport was made out. Haye, having no reason to do otherwise, retained his identity.

“We’ll get in touch with Marney as soon as

possible," announced the baronet as they sat down to dinner. "How d'you feel, by the by?"

"Magnificent!" declared the volcano. "Splendid!—I say, Ian! what an invigorating thing flying is! Can't think why it hasn't become more popular."

His booming voice penetrated to every corner of the room and brought a score of faces turning in his direction.

Taverner shot an uneasy glance at his brother-in-law. His inherent desire for self-advertisement irritated him. He began to regret that he had not left him behind. There was no harm in the whole world knowing that they had come to Genoa by air, but he felt that if he did not check Haye soon enough he might blurt out things that were better left unsaid.

"Flying is popular," he asserted, "as popular as it can be until the fares come down."

"A fat lot our fares cost us!" thundered the other, and winked heavily across the table.

Taverner gripped his table-napkin with both hands and his complexion changed from red to purple.

"Shut up, you confounded idiot!" he whispered.

A steely glare checked the eruption that his reprimand was within an ace of provoking.

Haye had coloured too. He removed an oyster from its shell and held it midway between the table and his mouth.

"All right," he protested meekly. "I haven't said anything I shouldn't, have I? You needn't be so deuced ratty about it."

In an effort to put matters on an easier footing, Taverner pushed the wine-list under the other's nose.

"What are you going to drink?"

"Water!" snapped Haye sulkily.

"Don't be a fool."

The painter wiped his mouth, squeezed a minute section of lemon over a second marine mollusk and showed signs of interest in the printed catalogue.

"I hate this hole-and-corner business," he growled. "What about *Grignolino*?"

"Just as you like," agreed Taverner, and beckoned a waiter over.

The wine was opened and on the table when he put in a tactful inquiry.

"Does there happen to be an Englishman named Dighton stopping in this hotel?"

The little waiter drew closer.

"The Signor Dighton, *signore*: There was indeed until this morning. A very charming gentleman, you will understand—very popular and very *simpatico*!"

Taverner frowned.

"Do I understand you to say that he left this morning?"

The other bent over until his head came between the two Englishmen.

"A very strange thing happened here to-day, *signori*," he declared in a low voice. "A young English lady came here to see the Signor Dighton. She had come from Paris only last night and had called to see him several times without finding him in.

This morning, however, she found him and they talked together for some time in the lounge. That would be about half-past ten or perhaps a little later. I came into the lounge in answer to the bell to find this same lady at a table by the window, conversing with another Englishman—a friend of the Signor Dighton's. He ordered drinks—a vermouth for himself and, *franciata* for the lady. The Signor Dighton, as I afterwards heard, was in the office ordering an automobile to drive to Portofino. He returned to the lounge only a moment before myself. What did we find?—The other Englishman senseless on the floor with a wound at the back of his head—and the young English *signorina* vanished——”

Taverner kicked Haye under the table.

“How vanished——?”

The waiter spread his hands wide apart.

“Some thief—some bandit perhaps—had come in by the door from the stairs, chloroformed the poor *signorina* in all likelihood and carried her off to a waiting car. It was a terrible business! The Signor Dighton jumped into a second motor and followed.”

“What happened then?” demanded the baronet.

The waiter smiled faintly.

“Many things happened after that, *signore*. The police were telephoned for. *Per Bacco!* I was all the morning answering questions!—Two hours ago a little *Americano* came and paid the Signor Dighton's bill. He had had an accident, it seems, and had been taken to hospital.”

"And the lady," jerked in the painter, determined to put his spoke in somehow; "what happened to her?"

The little man shrugged his shoulders.

"Nobody knows, *signore*. If you care to see it, I will bring you the evening paper. It has an entire column about the affair. Late this afternoon the police found both cars completely overturned. One had fallen over a precipice and both drivers had been killed. But of the fate of the lady or her abductor nothing is known."

Taverner cleared his throat.

"We can see the paper after dinner, *cameriere*," he decided. "It appears that we have arrived in Rapallo at an eventful moment! Did you catch the name of the lady, by any chance?"

The waiter's face brightened and he wrote something on the corner of the wine-list with his pencil.

"That too was in the paper," he explained. "She purposed travelling to Rome this afternoon, and was staying at the Ferrovia. Quite a modest establishment, you will understand, but convenient for the station."

Taverner picked up the wine-list, blinked at it, then passed it across the table.

"Good Lord!" muttered his companion under his breath.

The waiter had written in queer, sprawling characters—*Miss Hays!*

Chapter XXIX

TAVERNER went out in search of Marney alone.

In the privacy of his own bedroom after dinner he had lectured Haye on the importance of keeping his mouth shut. The fact that they had inquired about Dighton would in no way connect them with the morning's outrage. There was just a chance that an observant clerk might notice that the girl and one of the newly-registered guests possessed the same surname, but that quite probably would be looked upon as a coincidence. English names were always a mystery to foreigners. The Casino Hotel had possibly had as many as three unrelated *Smiths* on its list at one time.

Strolling downhill towards the lights of the main town, Taverner tried to piece together this elaborate jig-saw puzzle. According to the waiter's story, his niece had broken her journey at Rapallo to see Dighton. This was the most puzzling point of all. As far as he was aware, she had only seen him for one evening. All three of them had dined together at *Donati's* in Oxford Street and afterwards Dighton and she had danced at the *Cockatoo Club*.

He paused by the railings opposite the palm-trees and gazed pensively out to sea.

Looking back on that evening, he remembered now how eagerly they had danced together, how

extraordinarily friendly they had become within a few brief hours.

Dighton was an uncommonly good-looking fellow and Greta was the kind of girl that would attract any man. Was it possible, he demanded, that unknown to himself these two youngsters had come to an understanding? Stranger things than that had happened. He was dealing with improbabilities every day of his life. For what other reason could she have left the Rome train to visit Dighton at his hotel?

He turned away from the water and moved across the *piazza* towards the entrance to the Via Emilia.

The little greengrocer's shop was in darkness.

He rapped on the door with his stick and a hoarse voice challenged him from an upper window.

"Who is it?"

"I am looking for the Signor Marney."

The head was withdrawn and after a short interval he heard heavy footsteps on the bare boards within. The door opened a matter of six inches and the large, unshaven face of Guglielmo Fontanelli was thrust out.

That Taverner was no stranger to Rapallo was evident from the greengrocer's expansive smile.

"*Madre di Dio!*" was his joyful welcome. "*Il Colonello!*"

And he dragged the visitor inside.

Taverner, hurried through the unsavoury atmosphere of the shop to the accompaniment of murmured apologies from Fontanelli, found himself

pushed into a chair before a table upon which a bottle of wine and glasses made their appearance. The Signora Fontanelli—larger than her husband, and with a tremendous mountain of hair which looked strange in these days of *shingling*—beamed at him from the kitchen doorway, with a bright-eyed *Signorina* peering over her shoulder.

The greengrocer slopped a little wine into his own glass and filled Taverner's to the brim.

"*Il Colonello!*" he exclaimed again. "To think that I kept you waiting in the street! *Por Dio!* Is it possible?"

A round of drinks and the signora and her daughter vanished discreetly, leaving the men to talk.

Taverner passed his host a cigar.

"Where's Marney?" he inquired.

"The Signor Americano is out," explained the other; "but we expect him back at any moment. We had the police here this morning——"

The baronet started.

"The police!" he echoed.

"It was purely a formality," Fontanelli hastened to assure him. "Something had disappeared from the *Villa Sabino*, and they were searching the quarters of all foreigners known to be in residence here."

"They found nothing?"

"Nothing whatever, Signor Colonello." He tapped a broad nose with his forefinger. "*It was too well hidden!*"

Taverner drew in a deep breath.

"Then there was something, Fontanelli?"

"There were two things," admitted the Italian in a hoarse whisper. "The young Englishman and Signor Marney brought them here last night very late—and we were an hour concealing them after he had gone—A drop more wine, *Signore*?"

Taverner shook his head.

"I am getting old, Fontanelli," he declared, "and I cannot drink as I used. Besides, I have flown from England to-day and I am tired. Your daughter is getting a fine girl."

The greengrocer slapped his thigh and chuckled.

"A man is never old when he can find something to admire in a woman! *Si, Signore*, Paola is good-looking enough they tell me—and a good-looking daughter is a responsibility in these days."

He sprang to his feet as a door slammed behind him and Marney came into the room.

"Say, Chief!" he gasped as soon as he recognised Taverner. "This is a surprise, sure enough. What's in the wind?"

"Quite a lot, as far as I have been able to gather."

His hand dropped on Marney's shoulder.

"You had my wire?"

"Why sure; I got that this morning."

"Any news of Miss Haye?"

The American tossed his hat into a corner and sat down. A curt nod to Fontanelli left them alone.

"Listen here, Chief: Dighton raided Ahlborg's

outfit last night and got clean away with a couple more of those guns. One was of the type we've already seen; the other was a more powerful thing altogether. It was a peach of a raid. I saw it from the gate—and I know. Right on top of your cable the police rolled up and searched the place inside out, It was a German raid, as it happened, only we took advantage of it. They weren't suspecting us, but were just making sure. Anyway they got nothing for their trouble and beat it empty-handed. By the time I'd got across to see Dighton, *The Lizard* had knocked a guy out in the hotel, taken Miss Haye and made off in an automobile. Somehow or other Dighton got wind of it and followed. The two cars crashed on a lonely strip of road between Sestri Levante and Borgotaro and all I found when I got there was Dighton, shot through the chest."

Taverner nodded.

"How is he?—Pretty bad, I take it?"

"Well," responded Marney with a flash of his gold teeth, "he ought to be dead, but he's not. He's full of fever at the moment, of course, and spilling just that sort of nonsense you expect a chap to spill when he's applied for his ticket to heaven twice in one day—and been refused each time! I don't know if you've noticed, Chief, but as soon as we took on Dighton we had a change of luck. *The Lizard* had it all his own way until he took a hand, now he's got to work almighty hard to score a point——"

"He's got my niece, Marney——"

"Yes," pursued the other sympathetically, "but he won't keep her long. In my opinion, that's about the poorest move he's made. A guy who wants to keep his identity a mystery is always safer to play a solo game. The police have taken this business to heart. A couple of lives were lost getting that girl away—and they're not going to forget it in a hurry. If you can manage to slip 'em a decent picture of Miss Haye they'll track her right enough—and where they find Miss Haye they'll find *The Lizard*."

Taverner looked at the ceiling.

"And supposing they don't?"

"If they don't then Dighton will. If there's any sense in his delirium at all, he's crazy on your niece, Chief."

The baronet nodded again.

"I was afraid so."

There was a long silence.

"Dighton's a mighty good fellow," said Marney at length.

Taverner paid no attention.

"Aren't you a trifle optimistic?" he suggested presently. "The police have been aware of *The Lizard*'s activities for some time past—and Dighton will be a back number for weeks, possibly months."

The American shook his head.

"Don't you believe it, Chief. I'll lay even money with anybody he'll be about again inside ten days. That's what I meant when I talked about his luck. It's the effect of the fall that's holding him down now.

The bullet hit a flask he was carrying and took a sideways turn. It wouldn't have done that if it had been you or me, but Dighton's got a lucky streak in his make-up that's better than a shirt of mail. *The Lizard's* a poor shot with an ordinary pistol—at least that's how I figure it out. He can raise Cain with the *Pocket-Death*, because that's fool-proof. A clean shot would have drawn a bead on Dighton's skull and made sure of him. *The Lizard* wanted a bigger target."

Taverner rose to go. The long journey by air had rendered him drowsy. He yawned as he spoke.

"Ten days is a long time, Marney. Where is he now?"

"In a private nursing-home in Genoa."

"I see. You'd better meet me at the *Porto Principe* to-morrow at eleven and we'll run along and see him.—He's done well while he'd been out here, eh?"

"Chief," declared Marney, "when I tell you some details about that raid on the villa—you won't believe me. It made Langley's stunt look like child's-play. Ahlborg had got his long-range gun playing on the drive too—and his dogs didn't help any!"

The other held out his hand.

"Well, good-night, Marney. We meet in the morning. Glad to hear all you say about Dighton. I always found him a good man myself."

The other let him out by the street-door.

On the way back to the hotel Taverner made up his mind. He would send Dick along to the police on

the morrow. Haye was known in Rome. It was quite natural that he should have hurried to the scene of his daughter's disappearance as soon as possible. He need say nothing about his brief visit to England. His presence at police headquarters would serve two purposes: It would put the authorities in possession of fuller particulars of the missing girl, and it would remove from Dighton any suspicion of having taken part in the *Villa Sabino* affair. The story was straightforward enough in all conscience: Greta had been travelling from London to visit her father in Rome and had stopped a night in Rapallo to see her fiancé, who was spending the winter there. *Fiancé* sounded better than *acquaintance*. According to Italian standards, for a young girl to visit a young man in the way Greta had done was barely respectable. *The Lizard* would not be mentioned, of course. It would be fatal to Taverner's other interests, and it would not make the task of the police any easier, for the simple reason that nobody had the slightest idea who *The Lizard* was.

He turned out two photographs of Greta before retiring to bed.

Chapter XXX

MARNEY had told Taverner nothing about himself or his views on the mysterious disappearance of Greta Haye from the lounge of the Casino Hotel. On the contrary, he had encouraged him to base his hopes on the activities of the Italian Police.

Marney, as it happened, had certain theories already, and was only awaiting an opportunity of putting them to the test.

Within ten minutes of the baronet's departure he left the shop in the Via Emilia by the back way and walked briskly towards the Casino.

It was a wonderful night, clear and starlit. In the *piazza* under the trees a little group of Italians had gathered, talking excitedly. He noticed as he passed that one of them carried a newspaper and guessed what was the subject under discussion. One of them ejaculated "*Povero Dante!*" doubtless referring to the dead driver of Dighton's car. From somewhere close at hand there drifted to Marney's ears the tinkling notes of a mandoline. . . .

"*Povero Dante!*" echoed a voice inside the little American's brain. It had very nearly been "*Povero Dighton!*"

He gritted his teeth, and the lines on his face hardened. For a while at least he was going to forget Ahlborg and his blue dope—and concentrate on

running *The Lizard* to earth. Up to that morning Marney had admired his masked adversary, respected him for the apparent infallibility of his methods, the cleanness of his get-aways, his immunity from arrest. To-day, however, *The Lizard* had dropped sadly in his estimation: He had kidnapped a woman who knew nothing of the business in which they were engaged. More than that, he had made sure that Dighton was unarmed before plugging him—a thing which, for some reason, rankled with Marney. The truth of it all was that the American had become a hero-worshipper in the passage of a single night. He had prophesied for Dighton a long run of successes—and was annoyed at this first set back.

He tried to see what had happened immediately before Greta's disappearance. Working backwards, following-up information gleaned from various sources since the affair, he came to the conclusion that *The Lizard* had not ventured upon this latest exploit without the aid of accomplices.

He had received news of Miss Haye's departure from England and had joined her train somewhere along the route before it reached Rapallo.

Marney frowned.

There was a hitch here somewhere.

If *The Lizard* had followed Greta from her train, why had he not taken advantage of the many opportunities of surprising her which must have presented themselves during her fruitless search for Dighton? He would have had all the advantage of darkened

streets and deserted thoroughfares. There would have been no need for violence.

He snapped his fingers.

Either *The Lizard* had remained in Rapallo and entrusted the dogging of Greta to some agent—or he had heard on his arrival of Dopmann's projected raid on the *Villa Sabino* and been forced to change his tactics.

This latter theory was disquieting. It suggested among other things that Dighton and he had been watched. In which case the bandit probably knew or had guessed in what house he would have to look for the apparatus they had spirited away.

With the lights of the Casino in sight, Marney turned on his heel and went back.

It was one thing to get back from *The Lizard* what he had taken, it was another to ensure that he did not crown the achievements of the day by a second *coup*!

He routed out the burly Fontanelli.

"Now, see here, Fontanelli," he said, "there may be other people after those things in the cellar. I don't say they know that they're here, but there's a big chance that they do. In any case, we're not taking risks. Keep a look out while I'm away. I want to protect what we've got, you understand. If anybody does look in, I'd like to get a look at his face."

Fontanelli drew his hand across his mouth and nodded grimly.

"*Capito, Signore,*" he said.

"If they come at all," pursued Marney, "they'll come soon."

The other nodded.

"I shall be ready, *signore*."

"You can't use a gun; it'd make too much noise. What are you going to do about it?"

For answer Fontanelli drew a knife from a trousers pocket and exposed to the electric light a narrow blade fully seven inches in length. Holding it by the point, he drew the American's attention to the portrait of a woman hanging on the far wall, a dusty, dingy thing in an unglazed frame that had once formed the upper half of a colossal calendar.

Marney, observing him curiously, saw his right hand twitch in a curious backhand way. The next thing he knew was the knife landing with commendable accuracy in the centre of the woman's throat!

"Some throw!" murmured the little man thoughtfully.

Fontanelli grinned.

"When I was a boy," he admitted proudly, "I could split an apple at a distance of twenty paces. That was in Sicily, *signore*; they do these things better down there!"

He strolled over and plucked the knife from the wall.

"*Va bene!*" said Marney from the doorway. "I leave it in your hands entirely. If you can hold the fellow without killing him, so much the better! I shall be away an hour, maybe two. If you want

me, send someone to look around the Casino gardens."

The group under the trees had vanished when Marney passed the spot for a second time and the notes of the mandoline were no longer audible.

Harking back to the old line of reasoning, he decided that *The Lizard* had at least one agent either on the Casino staff or sufficiently well-known at the hotel to enable him to move about without fear of arousing suspicion. *The Pocket Death* had disappeared from Dighton's room through some such channel as this and his revolver had been emptied of cartridges. These, Marney felt certain, were small yet important details to which *The Lizard* did not attend personally. It was possible, too, that a signal from a window that morning had given him his cue to enter.

He more than suspected Mafalda Pasquali.

It was strange that she had played into Dighton's hands so easily, stranger still that *The Lizard* should have surprised them at the foot of the cliffs on the first night of their acquaintance. And yet, if she indeed were *The Lizard's* accomplice, she did not appear to have rendered him very efficient service. The bandit had had to travel to London and raid Taverner's study in order to obtain the only instrument which, to Marney's knowledge, had left Ahlborg's laboratory before Dighton took a hand. With an agent established in the villa, such a move should have been unnecessary.

He entered the Casino gardens by the turnstile. The dance-orchestra was playing in the ballroom. Couples flitted past the lighted windows. He caught the swift shuffling movement of many feet over a polished floor, bursts of feminine laughter, the varied, bizarre noises made by an energetic jazz-drummer.

Raising himself on tip-toe, he recognised Mafalda presently, dancing with a stout man with close-cropped hair whom Marney knew as one of a German deputation that had come to see Ahlborg during the previous summer.

He found a seat and sat down.

Complications were setting in!

Here was Germany trying for the invention by force on the one night and negotiation on the next! Either their staff-work was faulty or extraordinarily subtle. Whichever way it was, it was irritating to Marney, who had come there with the sole purpose of solving the mystery of Greta's disappearance.

The music stopped abruptly.

Ten minutes later, as Marney still sat there, two figures left the main entrance to the Casino and strolled past him, talking earnestly in French. The taller of the two was Ahlborg, bearded and erect; his companion was the obese Von Roeschen, the emissary from Berlin.

There floated to his nostrils the odour of cigars many times more costly than his own humble *Toscanos*.

He was making up his mind to follow when the

Signorina Pasquali, muffled to her ears in sables, appeared in the doorway, casting anxious glances to left and to right. She flashed a signal with her fingers to someone behind her whom Marney could not see—then hurried off in the opposite direction to that which Ahlborg had taken.

A pause and the fourth figure appeared, that of a little cavalry officer in mufti—the Capitano Enrico Colombo, whom Dighton had noticed in the hall on the night of his arrival in Rapallo.

Marney swore under his breath.

Mafalda might have embarked upon another of her impassioned love-affairs, but he didn't think so. It was not so long since he had predicted to his colleague that things would be livening up, and not a few of his remarks were apt to be prophetic. They were livening up with a vengeance now. Ahlborg might be selling his dope to Von Roeschen—and Marney wanted to know. From the conversation between Mafalda and Colombo he might learn news of *The Lizard*, assuming of course that his suspicions in that direction were justified.

He sat there, with his collar upturned, positively writhing with uncertainty. Another couple—quite harmless people—passed him arm-in-arm.

He was on the horns of a dilemma—and he hated it.

Chapter XXXI

MARNEY decided to follow Ahlborg.

He was sorry for Greta, sorry for Taverner, but it was only too evident from what he had seen that greater issues were at stake. After all, it was Ahlborg's invention that had brought him to Rapallo, and it was up to him to exert every muscle to ensure it from falling into wrong hands.

He rose presently and moved off in search of the scientist and his guest.

He sighted them a few moments later, pausing at the foot of the first flight of stone steps, apparently lost in admiration of a tranquil sea reflecting the stars.

Marney had never quite realised what a colossal man Ahlborg was until he saw him outlined there in jet against a violet background. Von Roeschen, thickset as he was, seemed a pigmy beside him. The glowing tip of Ahlborg's cigar showed a foot above that of the German.

"Fine!" ejaculated the shorter man presently.
"Very beautiful!"

Ahlborg grunted.

"You Germans are queer fellows," he declared.
"Even in your most serious moments you find time to be sentimental! And yet you call yourselves a nation of warriors! You will never conquer the world, my friend, until you rid yourselves of sentiment."

He extended an arm towards the dim horizon.

"You are wondering what Goethe or Schiller would say about this scene. You are moved by the silver ripples on the water, the white foam at the foot of the cliffs—while at the same time you are wondering how far you can beat me down. I tell you, Von Roeschen, you cannot mix these things. When I started to manufacture *Ahlenite* I left sentiment to women and fools! I thought how many thousands of Germans I could kill with my gas." He chuckled hoarsely. "And then fool-sentimentalists stepped in and stopped me—and almost lost because of it! They were afraid for their views, Von Roeschen, don't you see?—afraid for their precious countryside!"

Marney, lurking in the shadows, wrinkled his forehead. Something had happened to Ahlborg. For weeks on end he had been morose, silent; now he was declaiming so loudly that his words must surely be echoing in the ears of the lovers in the garden.

"Shall I tell you what *I* see out there, Von Roeschen? I see ships, flat, oil-driven monitors, moving through the water at thirty, perhaps forty, knots. No turrets, no torpedo-tubes, no heavy guns; just flexible pipes pumping out livid blue rays! Sea-planes too, with silent engines, aeroplanes, shore-batteries—all equipped with those queer, unanswerable tubes . . . !"

Von Roeschen eyed the other a trifle nervously and laughed.

"You are a prophet, Ahlborg," he told him. "You have drawn aside the dark curtain of the future—and revealed the fleet of the Fatherland at sea!"

Ahlborg dealt the other a resounding blow with the flat of his hand which sent him swaying on the brink of the abyss—then jerked him back on to the steps by his coat-tails.

"In the days of which I am talking," he said, "there will be no German fleet, no British, no French nor even American."

"So?" queried the Teuton, more than a little exercised as to his companion's sanity.

"Exactly so, my dear Von Roeschen! You people have haunted me too long. You have made me realise the inestimable value of the secrets I possess. I am enlightened, my friend, disillusioned. All the gold in the world would not tempt me to sell. The board is down, I tell you, and you can go back to your country to-morrow. Karl Ahlborg haggles no longer."

His wild peal of laughter sent a cold sensation passing down Marney's spine. The man was mad. Taverner had always said he was mad. This last raid had been too much for him.

The German thought so too, for he turned his back on the sea and made as if to retrace his footsteps to the garden.

Divining his intention, Ahlborg caught him by the arm.

"Look!" he thundered. "Cannot you see them! Long, blue bars of light sweeping to infinity. How simple everything will be—and how effective! There will be no doctors in the next war, no nurses, no cumbersome hospital-ships. *The Blue Death* does not wound, Von Roeschen; it kills mercifully, surely; it pulverises everything! I see you are a man with vision, a man after my own heart. We will go lower, down to the water's edge, and talk about this thing. I tell you there are spies everywhere, listening; Italian spies, French spies, English spies, German spies. . . . ! A German came to my house last night. Did you know that? They tried the *Blue Death* on him—and he melted away on the path. When the police came there was just a heap of dust—German dust! They would try an ordinary man for murder for a thing like that; but they are afraid of Ahlborg—all of them. The police want me to leave Italy; the Government dares not let me out of its sight!"

Still talking, he drew the other down the steps to the bathing platform, and Marney followed, with an automatic shifted from his hip to his overcoat, hoping he would never have to use it.

He had forgotten Greta now, forgotten Dighton in a nursing-home in Genoa. Ahlborg had gone stark, raving mad, more mad than Taverner had ever believed possible. He was inflated with a sense of his own importance. He had left off playing with the world now and was in deadly earnest. In Marney's

ears the tocsin had already sounded, the signal for that last grim effort that was to send the inventor and his ghastly dope sky-high.

Above the incessant plashing of restless waters engaged on their eternal struggle with the rocks came the booming of Ahlborg's voice. The two men had completed the descent and were halted where the waves threw up intermittent showers of spray.

Von Roeschen was nervous. The American could see that from the spot behind the recess where Mafalda and Dighton had talked, and where he now clung, flattened out between jagged boulders, drinking in every syllable that fell from the madman's lips. He kept glancing behind him, as if seeking some means of escape from the giant who deafened him with his eloquence.

"I have a secret service too, Von Roeschen, and it is the best paid service in the world. I pay by results and, by heaven! I get them! If a man betrays me, I have means at hand of getting rid of him. If I lose things—they came back to me."

The other nodded.

"And so you are keeping this invention of yours for yourself, eh?"

"Ah!" commented Ahlborg; "so now you are beginning to understand. The fleet I have shown you is Ahlborg's fleet, the great invincible Armada that will terrorise the world. That will not come yet. One has to begin these things slowly, deliberately. I shall have to accumulate an arsenal of weapons.

The factories of Europe will make them for me—a part here, a part there, so that nobody will suspect. A *coup d'état* will bring Italy into my power, or Spain. Other countries will become alive to the danger and send their armies against me—and my *Blue Death* will wipe them out!—I should like you to see how it works, Von Roeschen. I assure you that you would be astonished.”

Von Roeschen had moved from the edge and perched himself on a rock, with his coat-collar turned up as a protection against the spray. His little pig-eyes kept turning back to those steps in a way that struck Marney as being oddly pathetic.

“The music is still playing,” he announced, apropos of nothing in particular, “and people are still dancing.”

“They will dance,” said the giant, “with the crack of doom in their ears and the crust of the earth cracking open to engulf them! Mafalda is like that.”

He rambled on, sometimes talking to himself, sometimes shooting disconnected sentences across at the German.

“I don’t know whether I should keep that girl. She is too pretty. She attracts so many men, you know. That blonde Englishman!”—He shook his head sadly from side to side—“They bungled that business badly. He should be dead by now—*Per Bacco!* what do you people take me for? A fool? I tell you I know every foreign agent in Rapallo! I sent her to trap that man—and she fell in love with

him instead! And then, this morning, the other lady came! Where is she now, Von Roeschen? You do not know; the police do not know; nobody knows!"

He crossed to where the other sat.

"Ahlborg knows, my friend! Mafalda knows too, but she will not tell. And the fellow who brought her to me is like myself, ambitious, unscrupulous, devoid of sentiment—eh, Von Roeschen? That was a good move of mine. You cannot deny that. Just one simple telegram; that was all. It was imperative that Mafalda should hate this Englishman. Well, she hates him now! And her countrymen are too busy looking for the girl to bother me. . . ."

The other eyed the end of his cigar.

"Do you arm these agents of yours with your new gun?"

Marney chuckled softly. He could see the point of this. Von Roeschen was back to business again. He was trying to discover how many of these *Pocket Deaths* were floating round the world. Out of the chemist's raving he was hoping to worm something that would put his people on the track of one of them.

"One of them had a weapon once. He got it back for me and I allowed him to keep it. There were certain things I wanted done, certain people who were getting to know too much. I was anxious, too, to experiment with the thing, anxious to see what would happen.—A Frenchman disappeared in London: you never heard of that, did you?"

Von Roeschen shook his head.

"A woman died in Paris—and not a word crept into the newspapers. This afternoon the last round from the pistol was fired—and the Italian police are digging up a field to hide the traces! They do not suspect *me*. Why should they? I was in Genoa in my car. They came to see me about it, and I reminded them of the instrument that had been stolen from my house weeks ago."

His arms shot out suddenly and he caught the German by his overcoat, dragging him from the rock on to the concrete platform.

"Two others have gone now. You know something about that. You sent men to invade my grounds, break into my house, slaughter my dogs. . . . I know who they were, I tell you. I can give you their names! Did you suppose I would treat with you after that? I brought you down here to make you speak. Little fat pig that you are!"

Marney, tired and cold, raised himself on his arms. They were not a dozen paces from him now—Ahlborg towering over the shorter man, whose face showed ashen-white against the night.

"I tell you I know nothing of all this—nothing at all."

A bellow like that of an enraged bull escaped Ahlborg's lips.

"Where are they, I say? What have you done with them? There were three men in this business: One was killed, the police caught another; but the third got away in the darkness. I will tell you his name—Hans Koenrich!"

The German paused in the midst of his struggling to voice an emphatic denial.

"I have never heard of him—never known a man of that name. . . ."

"I give you one more chance, Von Roeschen. Where are my guns?"

"I tell you I do not know."

Marney, suddenly apprehensive, saw Ahlborg throw the other from him with such force that he staggered against the wall of the recess right under the spot where the American was hiding.

"*Gott in Himmel!*" spluttered the German. "You do this to *me!* I——"

The threat his lips were framing petered out abruptly.

He was crouching back against the wall of rock, gazing with startled eyes at the levelled barrel of the *Pocket Death*.

"I do this to you too, Von Roeschen," said Ahlborg coldly. "I have a debt to settle with your people—and I have told you too much!"

There came a sound like the bursting of a steam-pipe. For a matter of seconds a brilliant blue light rendered every crevice in the wall visible. It died down presently, leaving only reeking fumes and a strange, huddled heap that had once been Von Roeschen. . . .

Ahlborg pocketed his gun and walked towards the sea. For some moments he stood stock-still, gazing down at the swirling waters.

Suddenly he threw both arms aloft and laughed horribly.

"This is the beginning," he cried to the stars. "The time for talking is past. *I shall destroy the world!*"

The moon passed behind a cloud, taking the silver from the sea until it resembled a vast expanse of molten tar with bands of foam showing ghostly white. A cold, desolate wind rustled the grasses where Marney lay and he shuddered from head to foot.

Ahlborg had gone.

He was mounting the flight with queer, jerky strides, the glow from his cigar denoting his progress to the top. Presently it vanished altogether.

Marney crawled to his feet.

He spoke to the stars too, but his remark was in the nature of a query to which he expected no answer.

"Say!" he muttered, conscious all the while of the grim heap below; "what d'you know about that?"

Chapter XXXII

ON the way back to the house in the Via Emilia, Marney dropped in at the *Caffe Liguria*.

It was the restaurant he most usually frequented, a comfortable, well-ordered place, with a patent coffee-machine, an array of bottles forming an immense pyramid behind the polished counter, and the prettiest barmaid in Rapallo.

Beyond a group of four soberly-clad tradesmen engaged in a game of cards, he had the room to himself. He sat down at his accustomed table by the radiator and pressed his numbed fingers against the pipes.

Pina, creeping from behind the bar, watched him with an amused smile.

"The Signor Americano is cold!"

Marney looked up sharply.

"I am," he admitted. "I'm as cold as charity. Get me a coffee and some cognac, *per piacere*, and I'll love you for ever and ever!"

The girl flushed, then burst into a peal of merriment.

"Perhaps I don't want you to love me!"

Marney's face puckered up into a myriad of tiny wrinkles.

"You don't, eh, Pina? Well, I can't say that I blame you. They tell me folks with cold hands have

warm hearts. If there's any truth in that—my heart must be boiling over!"

She favoured him with a quick glance that Marney was unable to interpret. A second later she was hidden behind the coffee-machine and water was bubbling, piping hot, into a cup.

The hot drink thawed his brain into working order. Before that he had been too cold to think. Lord! what a difference that hour had made! He had gone to the Casino turning vague theories over in his mind—and had come back stuffed so full of solid facts that he wanted the rest of the night to digest them!

Ahlborg was mad! He had suspected it before, and now he was sure of it. A madman in the possession of a secret like the *Blue Death* was not over-pleasant to contemplate.

"*The time for talking is past!*" he had shouted when he had believed there was no one around to overhear. There was no madness in that, Marney told himself. It was probably the sanest sentence he had uttered that evening. No Government was going to discuss terms with a raving lunatic!

He picked up a newspaper from the adjoining table and held it in front of him as a screen against Pina's restless eyes. He could see she was bored, and wanted to talk to him, but Marney was in no mood for conversation. He had to sort all these facts into their proper pigeon-holes before meeting Taverner at the *Porto Principe* in the morning.

Casino gardens, as he had said, and traced him here. It could only mean one thing.

The girl had vanished into the darkness. Marney broke into a run.

Entering by the back, he found a gaping hole in the kitchen floor, the cellar-flap standing open and the cellar below flooded with light. Peering down before making the descent, he made out Fontanelli himself, squatting on a keg, with his hands on his knees.

"Is that you, *signore*?" he called up. "Did I not always tell you there were rats in this cellar? Come down and see what our trap has caught!"

Marney went down.

He had seen the man already, a queer, white-faced creature, erect against a wall of packing-cases at the far end of the subterranean vault. One hand pawed at his throat, and his face and hair were bathed in perspiration. Moving closer, Marney saw the reason.

Fontanelli's knife, flung by the unerring hand of an ex-*Ardito*, had entered the side of his neck and held him pinned there!

"*Santa Madonna!*" moaned the wretched intruder; "I am in agony, *Signor Americano!*—I shall die!"

Marney halted between Fontanelli and his victim, eyeing him curiously. The little American was in his element now; his hands were on his hips, his legs set wide apart and his eyes glinted like two pin-points of fire.

"If you don't want to stop that way all night," he hissed, "tell me who you are."

The other writhed.

"Take out this knife and I will tell you."

"Tell me," retorted Marney, "and I *may* take out that knife!"

"*I am The Lizard!*" jerked out the other suddenly. Marney started as if he had been struck.

"You?" he ejaculated fiercely. "You?"

"I am *The Lizard*," insisted the victim again—and Marney pulled out the knife.

He knew before he had asked that the man who dropped fainting into his arms was the night-porter at Dighton's hotel.

Chapter XXXIII

PUNCTUALLY at eleven Marney joined Taverner in the main hall of the *Porto Principe* Station.

The baronet observed that the American looked tidier than usual. His dark, high-crowned *Borsolino* seemed new and the creases down the back and sleeves of an equally dark overcoat suggested that it had been packed away for some time.

"Ah! there you are, Marney!" he cried as the other came up. "Glorious morning, isn't it?—I trust you slept well."

The little man's forehead wrinkled pathetically.

"Well," he drawled, "I wouldn't exactly say that. Fontanelli and I had about half a night's sleep apiece."

"Oh? How was that?"

"Well," explained the other in a low voice, "it was this way: A guy broke into Fontanelli's place while I was out last night and Fontanelli practised a knife-trick on him that he'd learnt way-down in Sicily when he was a boy. He tells me once you've got the knack you can't lose it. Anyway, it'd stuck to our Italian friend right enough."

"You caught him then?"

Marney rubbed his hands together.

"You can bet your life we did! Fontanelli had got him all fixed up against some packing-cases when I got back. He seemed to have lost quite a lot of blood.

We just patched him up as best we could, put him to bed and took turns in watching him."

He cast an anxious glance around him.

"Now, look here, Chief: I've a whole lot I want to say to you and it won't keep. If you're agreeable, we'll take the funicular up to the *Righi* and sit out on a little terrace I know up there. You can get drinks and the scenery's magnificent."

Ten minutes later, on an eminence overlooking the port of Genoa, Marney unburdened himself.

"I've got news of Miss Haye, for one thing," he began. "*The Lizard* kidnapped her sure enough, but the idea wasn't his; it was Ahlborg's——"

"Ahlborg's?"

"That's what I said. Ahlborg's crazy. I tracked him to the foot of the cliff last night and overheard what he was saying to Von Roeschen. He's not selling that dope to anybody. He's keeping it to himself—and he's going to destroy the world! That's pretty good, isn't it? He talked a whole lot more of that sort of stuff until I was tired of listening to him. Then he wiped out Von Roeschen with that gun of his and beat it back to the Casino."

Taverner gasped.

"Killed Von Roeschen!" he ejaculated.

Marney nodded.

"I tell you the man's crazy. He's been verging on insanity for weeks—and Dighton's little business put the finishing touches. Last night he was all bottled up and had to let drive at somebody. So he chose

Von Roeschen, poor Mutt! Told him almost everything you and I have been waiting to know—and then turned the *Blue Death* on him! *The Lizard*, Mafalda Pasquali and Ahlborg are all in together. That sets you thinking, don't it? And we were going to get into the *Villa Sabino* through Mafalda falling for Dighton! *The Lizard's* gang's Ahlborg's secret service. Those few robberies we heard of must have been private ones of *The Lizard's*—or just thrown in as a blind."

Taverner leaned back in his chair and rested an elbow on a weather-beaten table.

"So we're getting at the truth at last," he commented. "A pretty unholy alliance!"

"You've said it, Chief! Those three'll want some handling."

"And my niece——?"

"Miss Haye is at the *Villa Sabino*, as far as I can make out."

The other pursed up his lips.

"I was afraid you were going to say that. How are we going to get her out?"

Marney was bending over the table, cutting a *Toscano* in two with his pen-knife.

"That was one of the things I wanted to talk to you about. The police are getting a bit tired of Mr. Ahlborg. They'd like to have him deported as an undesirable alien, but the Government's hanging fire, hoping to come to some arrangement about the dope. I saw Mafalda hanging around with the Captaino Colombo last night—and I reckon he's something to

do with it. Somebody other than ourselves could put the police wise concerning Miss Haye. They'd act on the information like a shot; but a police raid on the villa might put Ahlborg in a bad humour and prompt him to begin his campaign right away."

"In which case he might vent his spite on my niece?"

Marney had ignited a match and was puffing vigorously.

"That's how I look at it," he agreed between his teeth. "Then there's Von Roeschen, or what's left of him, down at the foot of the cliff. He'll be missed from the hotel and they'll be looking for him. There won't be a lot to recognise him by, I admit, but they'll see his watch and the blue stain and, if they've any sense at all, they'll concentrate on the *Villa Sabino* in any case. They may even make this fresh crime an excuse to confiscate everything they find there."

"I see your point," said Taverner.

"As far as I can see," pursued the American, "the *Villa Sabino's* got to be destroyed before they get going. It's got to be blown up, lock, stock and barrel. Ahlborg's got to go, his instruments, papers, everything. . . . We've the means to do that in Fontanelli's cellar now. We could go right ahead—if we could be sure of getting Miss Haye out of it first."

A faint smile played on Taverner's lips.

"Wipe him out with his own invention, eh?"

"Why not? Isn't it the obvious way out of it?"

The other drummed a tune on the table.

"I suppose it is. Oddly enough, the idea of employing

Ahlborg's weapon against himself hadn't occurred to me. It's a dangerous thing to handle, Marney."

"I'll handle it," said the American grimly. "I've one or two scores I'd like to settle with that gang. There's Corlitt and Langley; the way they tackled Dighton and that rotten trick Ahlborg played on the German last night. If you've seen a man blotted out by the *Blue Death*, you don't forget it in a hurry."

He snapped his fingers.

"Hell! I was almost forgetting! The guy we captured in Fontanelli's underground store says he's *The Lizard*."

Taverner faced him squarely.

"He does, does he? Any reason to disbelieve him?"

Marney shifted the half-*Toscana* he was smoking from one end of his mouth to the other.

"I can't see it, Chief," he complained. "I'd like to, but I just can't. You'd better drop in sometime and have a look at him. He hadn't the mask on him, for one thing; for another, he dropped into Fontanelli's trap too easily.—*The Lizard* would never have admitted who he was—and that's all our fellow has admitted."

"You questioned him about Miss Haye?"

"Sure."

"And he told you nothing?"

"Not a word."

"Why, do you suppose, he insisted he was *The Lizard*?"

Marney spread out his hands.

"Why did they kidnap your niece? She knew nothing of our affairs and neither Ahlborg nor his

agent could have been personally interested in her. If Ahlborg wanted *The Lizard* to use the *Pocket Death*, why didn't he give him one of the blamed things, rather than send him to England for it?—The whole thing's crazy. Ahlborg's directly behind every move that's been made up to now. I guess that's why it's all been so difficult to understand."

"The presence of Miss Haye at the villa now is very embarrassing to us."

The other shot out a lean finger.

"But we don't know she's there. Don't you see that? We're not supposed to know. If Ahlborg had thought I was listening, he'd have blotted me out with Von Roeschen."

Taverner rose to his feet.

For the first time that morning his companion noticed that he looked pale and tired.

"We'll go and see how young Dighton is," he announced without enthusiasm. "This latest development has taken the wind out of my sails, Marney. I was very fond of that girl, you know. I brought her up after her mother died. It's one thing to be mixed in a dangerous game yourself—and another to find your womenfolk involved. No, Marney, Greta's been taken with the direct object of spoiling our plans. *The Lizard* will let us know she's there; I feel convinced of it. Possibly there's a note at your place now, or in my hotel."

"Maybe you're right," agreed the American, and followed him to the entrance to the funicular railway.

Chapter XXXIV

THE taxi drew to a halt outside a large block of buildings at the foot of the *Via Venti Settembre*.

Taverner got out first.

He was in the act of settling with the driver when Marney caught his arm.

"Say, Chief!" he murmured in his ear; "you can't beat this country for spies! See who's comin' out of the place now."

Turning sharply, the baronet saw the dapper figure of a man, with horn-rimmed glasses and incipient side-whiskers showing above the turned-up collar of a grey overcoat. The newcomer shot a swift glance in the direction of the car, then made off rapidly towards the centre of the town.

Taverner stared after him.

"Is that the fellow you mean?"

"Why, sure. He was on the steps when I spoke to you. I don't like the look of this. We'd better slip up quickly and see what's happened to Dighton."

"Who was it?" queried the other when they had reached the hall.

"Gerardo—Ahlborg's private secretary."

Taverner whistled.

"Any use shadowing him?"

"Not a bit. We know all we want to know. Gerardo doesn't cut much ice anyway."

"He might assure us as to the whereabouts of my nièce."

Marney shrugged his shoulders.

"We'd have to corner him somewhere first—and that's none too easy in a big city. Gerardo's one bundle of nerves. He starts out *thinking* he's being followed. As soon as he felt one of us behind him, he'd make for the first policeman—and we don't want any truck with the *carabinieri* just now. Unless I'm much mistaken, you'll find news of Miss Haye upstairs."

A ring at the door of a second-floor flat brought a trim Italian maid on to the landing.

"I've brought along a friend to see Mr. Dighton," explained the American.

The girl ushered them into a tiny drawing-room that was typically English. Taverner perched himself on the edge of a deep, upholstered chair and stared round him at an assortment of occasional tables, a piano in a black case and an endless array of photographs in silver frames.

Within a few minutes of their arrival, a plump, uniformed matron came in.

"Good morning," she said to Marney. "Our patient's ever so much better this morning. The doctor was astonished when he saw him."

Marney brightened at the news.

He looked at Taverner.

"You heard that, Chief? Miss Leckie, this is Mr. Gallagher, a gentleman who is particularly interested

in Mr. Dighton. I've been telling him that the poor fellow was in very good hands."

Taverner was on his feet.

"I can't tell you how grateful I am to you for your kindness," he declared. "Mr. Dighton has the usual youthful proclivity to getting into scrapes and, as I daresay Mr. Marney has explained, we are anxious to avoid publicity. So he's progressing favourably, eh?"

"Splendidly. As a matter of fact, his injury was slighter than we at first supposed. I almost think you might see him."

Taverner cleared his throat.

"I should like to, if I could. I—er—I've come rather a long journey with that object in view, and I may have to return almost immediately."

Miss Leckie smiled.

"If you will excuse me a moment, I'll see if his room is ready."

She had hardly left the room when she was back again, with a small buff envelope between her fingers. She handed it to Marney.

"This letter came a few minutes back: It was delivered by hand. Your friend has made such a remarkable recovery that I was in two minds whether I should let him see it. But I thought——"

"I'll take charge of it," said the American. "I saw the messenger outside and I know exactly what it contains."

As soon as they were alone again, he inserted a

finger beneath the flap and ripped it open. It contained some writing on a single sheet of paper.

Taverner looked over his shoulder.

"*Villa Sabino, Rapallo,*" they read together.

"My Dearest.—They have brought me here. I am safe and well. As long as no attempt is made to rescue me, there is no danger. If the police come, they have threatened to kill me. For heaven's sake do nothing.

"GRETA."

There was a postscript at the foot:

"Destroy this as soon as you have read it.—G."

Taverner sat down heavily.

"What did I tell you?" he demanded. "Somebody must have followed you here yesterday. They made her write that, don't you see? It's incredible, Marney. Who is this *Lizard*?—and where does he get his information?"

"It beats me," said the other.

The matron, reappearing at that moment, led them along a narrow, carpeted corridor to a door at the far end.

"Don't make him talk too much," was her parting request. "We don't want a relapse."

Dighton was sitting up in bed, with a blanket thrown over his shoulders. At sight of Taverner a trace of colour came into his cheeks.

The baronet held out his hand.

"How are you, Alan? I expect you're wondering what I'm doing here."

"I think I can guess. Have you any news of her?"

"Now, see here, Dighton," put in Marney's voice from the foot of the bed, "your job's to listen—not to talk. Miss Leckie's afraid we'll excite you."

Dighton laughed.

"Everyone wants to treat me as an invalid," he complained. "It's perfect nonsense. I feel a holy fraud lying here at all." The smile vanished in an instant. "Tell me what's happened since I crocked up. Have you found her yet?"

Taverner moistened his lips.

"Miss Haye is quite safe," he said.

The other started.

"Then you've found her?—you've got her with you?"

The baronet shook his head.

"She's being held as hostage at the *Villa Sabino*. Marney discovered that last night—and we have received confirmation this morning. There's nothing to get excited about, you understand."

He contrived to speak as if he believed that.

Dighton raised himself slightly and stared into space.

"At the *Villa Sabino*!" he muttered. "Then *The Lizard*——"

"*The Lizard* is apparently one of Ahlborg's confederates. Driving away from Rapallo with her in

the car was merely a scheme to entice you to some spot where you could be done away with."

Dighton pursed up his lips.

"I see that now. And the telegram from Rome was a fake?"

"Absolutely. Greta's father called on me in London on Wednesday night and I guessed at once what had happened. I cabled to Rome and to Marney—and flew to Genoa from London yesterday. Things have developed rather rapidly since my arrival. Definite measures have to be taken against Ahlborg immediately. You remember what I explained to you at our first meeting?"

"You're going all out?"

"Precisely. This last cunning move of Ahlborg's has baffled us completely. We shall have to put our heads together and find some way of getting my niece away from the villa before operations commence, or before the police get moving on their own account. It appears that Ahlborg killed a man last night.

Dighton groaned.

"And so you propose leaving me out of it?"

"It looks as though we shall have to. From what Marney tells me, you've done splendid work while you've been out here—and you can't expect to be in everything. While you're recuperating, I'll bring Lamotte up from Rome."

Dighton looked down at his fingers and up again at Taverner.

"I blame myself entirely for what's happened to Miss Haye," he blurted out suddenly. "She broke her journey at Rapallo to see *me*. If she had gone on to Rome——"

"It seems to me," interposed Marney, "that *The Lizard*—or Ahlborg, if you like it better—knew she was going to stop off at Rapallo."

"If he knew that, he knew more than I did. I had no idea she was coming until the night-porter at the hotel told me she'd called."

Marney bared his gold teeth.

"And the night-porter at the Casino is being looked after by Fontanelli at this moment! He was one of the gang, Dighton. That explains how the *Pocket Death* disappeared from your room, and why your gun hadn't any cartridges in the cylinder when you met *The Lizard*! Mafalda's in the swim too. I overheard Ahlborg boasting that he'd the livest secret service in the world—and I'm inclined to believe he's right!"

"Present company excepted, of course," smiled Taverner.

Marney screwed up his face.

"And I'm not so sure about that either!—The night-porter holds that he is *The Lizard*."

Dighton shook his head slowly from side to side.

"Don't you believe it!"

The American started.

"Eh?" he demanded. "What's that?"

"Do you know who *The Lizard* is, Alan?" asked Taverner quietly.

The invalid stuck his hands on his hips, so that the blanket slipped back from his shoulders, displaying a pink pyjama-coat several sizes too small for him. A queer look had come into his eyes and his chin had assumed a tilt that was particularly aggressive.

"I do," he declared. "I met him face to face yesterday and I'm not likely to have forgotten that incident. I'm the only one of this little party who's ever been in Ahlborg's house. I know my way about there, more or less, and I've got the key somewhere that Dopmann had made to get him in. You fellows think you can do without me in this stunt. Well, carry-on with it—and good luck to you. I'll tell you this though; if you insist on keeping me here, with nothing but a few bruises and a bandage across my chest, I'm keeping my information to myself!"

Taverner stared at him in amazement. His face went white, then red again and he appeared to be breathing with difficulty.

"We've got him excited, Chief," murmured Marney in his ear. "He's getting light-headed."

"Light-headed be blowed!" said Dighton.

"Don't be a fool, Alan," put in the baronet. "You're crocked and you know it. In any case, you've no right to sit there making conditions. You say you have the key to the *Villa Sabino*. I'm not

certain, but I rather fancy *I* hold the key to your happiness. Correct me if I'm wrong."

The younger man coloured and grinned.

"Sorry, sir," he stammered. "I'm afraid I made rather an ass of myself just now. They stowed my kit in that cupboard behind where Marney is standing; you'll find the key in the waistcoat pocket. *The Lizard* is——"

He bent forward and whispered.

The baronet leaped from his chair.

"Who?" he gasped. "Who?"

Dighton repeated the name.

"It explains a lot, doesn't it?" he added after a long silence.

Taverner fingered his chin.

"You're sure of this?"

"Absolutely. I knew him in a moment."

"I've found the key, Chief," called Marney from the cupboard. "Guess we'd better hang on to it. It may come in useful."

Taverner had caught Dighton's hand and was shaking it warmly.

"By Jove!" he was saying; "I thought I was doing you a good turn when I recruited you, but, by heaven! you've repaid me a thousandfold for the interest I took in you. We must be going now. As for Greta, get well as soon as you can and—and we'll talk things over."

He encountered Marney by the door.

"This is really extraordinary," he declared. "We

were wrong from the beginning. Lord!" he concluded wrathfully, "if I could only lay hands on the scoundrel, I'd give him a horsewhipping!"

* * * * *

At about six that evening Marney threw discretion to the four winds and unearthed Taverner in the Casino lounge. He seemed very excited and was waving a blue telegraph-form.

"What do you know about that," he inquired, thrusting it between the baronet's paper and his eyes. "I tell you that guy's *mustard!*"

The other adjusted his glasses.

"*Patient left home four this afternoon wire instructions Leckie,*" he read aloud.

"That's Dighton," translated the other promptly.

"Thanks, Marney," retorted Taverner without enthusiasm; "I'd guessed that already!"

Chapter XXXV

LONG after the others had left, Dighton lay back on the pillows, thinking, with the bright sunlight throwing squares of yellow light on a green carpet and the distant hum of traffic drifting up to him from the *Via Venti Settembre*.

Lunch was brought in presently by a slim day-nurse—who measured out some medicine in a glass and straightened his bed before leaving. It was an invalid's lunch, moist and singularly unattractive to a man in Dighton's state of mind. He accepted it, however, without comment.

The atmosphere of the place was getting on his nerves. A vague suggestion of disinfectant hung everywhere, of super-cleanliness. He was profoundly glad that the nurse's shoes squeaked: that, and the occasional ringing of some other patient's bell, were the only noises that jarred upon the depressing silence of the home itself. It was in well-ordered places like these that babies were born, he reflected. Surgeons came here, with implements in unobtrusive little hand-bags, and removed appendices; physicians flourished their stethoscopes, nurses their clinical thermometers. He could imagine it an ideal refuge for those who were seeking quiet and rest. Dighton, as it happened, had no desire for either. He wanted to be up and doing, to snatch Greta

from the clutches of the formidable three and to take part in that final assault on Ahlborg's house.

The thought of Greta at the mercy of *The Lizard* brought on a paroxysm of impotent fury. The entire universe seemed to have entered into a conspiracy against him: Greta had been spirited away almost under his eyes—and they were keeping him from going to her assistance. He was incensed with Marney for having brought him there, with Taverner for not giving the instructions to the matron that would have set him free. They spoke of him as a crock, a back number—and he had headed a counter-attack in Flanders when suffering from far more serious injuries than he had now! The whole thing was ridiculous!

A plan began forming itself in his brain, a reckless, extravagant scheme that commended itself more and more to him as he considered it. A grim smile hovered on his lips. He would show Ahlborg whose was the best secret service! *The Lizard*, Marney and Taverner were all very well in their way, but this final scene was one which would be settled by the bigger men—himself and Ahlborg, whose extra inch or two in height and greater girth made him pass for a giant.

For a full half-hour he stared at a distempered wall, pondering the thing until every phase of the proposed venture stood out in his mind with all the vividness of a series of stereoscopic views. The sheer impudence of the scheme staggered him. It was as

if some other person had thought of it and imparted it to himself. It was by no means water-tight. Embarked upon half-heartedly, it would be doomed to instant failure, but daring and determination might pull it through.

"By heaven!" he muttered aloud, "I'll do it, if it kills me!"

He must get out of that home—an absurdly easy thing when compared with the bigger issues, and yet, when faced with the problem of slipping into his clothes and along the passage to the outer door, it assumed tremendous proportions.

He was still debating this when the nurse returned with the news that a lady was in the drawing-room, asking to see him. Miss Leckie was out, it appeared, and the visitor refused to go away.

Dighton frowned.

"Does she give any name?" he demanded.

"None whatever; but she insists that her business with you is urgent."

He was conscious of a wild, impossible hope.

"Is she English?"

She shook her head.

"Oh, no, Mr. Dighton. She is an Italian lady."

"What does she look like? Is she pretty?"

The nurse smiled.

"Very, I should say. You have had two visitors already to-day, you know, and I feel sure Miss Leckie——"

"Show her in," said Dighton.

The girl hesitated for some seconds at the door, shrugged her shoulders and complied.

Mafalda Pasquali came suddenly in.

She paused between the doorway and the bed, then dropped on her knees by his side in an agony of tears.

This was as unexpected as it was embarrassing. His first desire was to pacify her somehow and get rid of her. Knowing her jealous temperament as he did, he had believed their parting in the hotel gardens to be final.

"Who told you I was here?" he asked presently.

Her dark, tear-stained eyes looked up at him.

"Gerardo told me. Listen," she continued breathlessly, "you must leave Italy at once. It is no longer safe for you here. Ahlborg knows you are here. If he found out I had come here to warn you, he would kill me."

Dighton nodded.

"Why have you come here to warn me, Mafalda?"

She stretched out her arms to him and her be-ringed fingers pressed into his arms hungrily.

"Because I love you, Alan," she declared. "Because I love you in a way that girl they have up there could never understand. We are all spies—you, I, *The Lizard* and the little American who brought you to this house. Why do you shake your head at me like that? You know that I am speaking the truth. Ahlborg paid me to lure you into his clutches, and your people paid you to associate with *me*. I am a fool to have come to you, but because

you were wounded and broken, because I saved your life once down by the sea-shore, and because I am a woman, I came."

She rose to her feet, a pathetic, dramatic figure in mauve, with a bunch of violets pinned to her breast. If she had never been sincere in her whole life before, she was so now. Dighton knew it and was deeply touched.

"What fragment of truth," she continued, "have we left out of all this miserable subterfuge? I love you more than my life; and you——"

A lump rose in his throat.

"I have always liked you, Mafalda," he told her. "Nobody hated deceiving you more than myself."

"*Liked* me, eh? And, I suppose, that is all! And yet, if that other woman had not come into your life first, it might have been so different. I have heard her story, Alan. I saw her in her room last night and she told me everything. She begged me to help her to escape—so that she might go to you."

She shook her head.

"I am not built for self-sacrifice, Alan—at least, not in that way. I wanted to hate her—and I couldn't. We had something in common, you see: We both of us wanted something that we could never have. I knew then, as I know now, that you would not desert her for me—and Ahlborg is keeping her there for *The Lizard*."

Dighton started.

He was learning something vital at last.

"Keeping her until when, Mafalda?"

"Until he succeeds in getting back those guns."

His heart was beating wildly now. Her revelation of the conditions existing in the *Villa Sabino* was all-important. It meant that Greta was safe, that he had yet time——"

"Guns?" he echoed. "What guns?"

She gave him a faint smile, full of wisdom and understanding.

"You know, Alan," she assured him. "You know better than anyone else. You have fought well, *Caro*, but the odds against you were too big. Karl Ahlborg is mad. Does that surprise you? He is endowed with all the cunning of a maniac, cunning that will outwit you at every turn. He twists the Government here around his little finger. Do you know what he is going to tell the police to-morrow? He will assure them that it was *you* who invaded the *Villa*, stole his invention and used it to kill Dopmann and Von Roeschen! They will believe him, Alan, because it suits them to believe. Colombo is still hoping—and they have no notion what Ahlborg has in mind."

Dighton's brain reeled. Something told him that she was speaking the truth. Prevented from avenging himself personally, Ahlborg was going to the police whom he had hitherto despised. Dighton could not afford to be arrested. It was conceivable that his enemy would bring along a host of witnesses to give evidence against him, and not a soul would come to

testify in his favour. That was the recognised fate of the secret service man who had failed to avoid arrest!

"I have killed nobody, Mafalda," he said quietly. "It was somebody in the grounds who wiped out Dopmann and I have never heard of Von Roeschen."

She picked up her gloves from the floor to which they had fallen.

"No one will believe you," she returned. "That is why I assure you that you must go at once. It is fortunate that he has been so long making up his mind. He has been busy all day in the laboratory and to-night he goes out at eight in the car. But to-morrow——"

Dighton's brain had suddenly become active.

"You go to the Casino?" he interposed.

"No. Karl goes out alone; where I cannot tell you."

Thoughts for Mafalda's safety prompted him to suggest an appointment which he would never keep.

"I will get out of here this afternoon," he said. "I shall wait for you in the dancing-hall to-night at eight. We will have one last dance together, for the sake of a friendship which I value. I may be a little late——"

She bent over him impulsively.

"It is not safe," she pleaded.

"You are risking much this afternoon, Mafalda."

"*Addio, caro!*" she whispered and kissed his lips. At the doorway she looked back.

"I shall be there, dearest," she added—and was gone.

Chapter XXXVI

FONTANELLI'S shop was still open when Marney returned from his interview with Taverner.

As he opened the door of his room a familiar voice greeted him:

"Hullo, Marney! you old blighter!"

He saw Dighton right ahead of him, reclining easily on three chairs set in a line. His own cognac bottle was on the table, and there was every evidence to hand that its contents had been sampled.

He closed the door behind him and leaned against it.

"So you've come here, eh? Well, I admire you for it. I never had much truck with women myself but, if I had, I guess I'd have followed much the same line as yourself."

Dighton grinned.

"Does Taverner know?"

"Sure, he does. The home wired us a quarter-of-an-hour back. How d'you feel now you're out?"

"Splendid, thanks. I'm just pulling myself together for the final push. What's the time now?"

The gun-metal chronometer left Marney's pocket.

"Six fifteen, as near as makes no matter."

"Quarter past six, eh? That gives us loads of time. Now, look here, Marney: I've a whole load of crêpe-hair and grease-paint in my pocket. Are you any sort of hand at making a fellow up?"

The other rubbed his chin.

"I won't pose to be an expert," he returned; "but it won't be the first time I've done it. What's the idea?"

"I'll tell you in a minute. Mafalda's been to see me this afternoon—to tell me Ahlborg's putting the police on to me to-morrow. That means I've to clear out in double-quick time. It also signifies that we've to get Greta away to-night. To use your own words, Marney, we've got to *hustle*. The *Luxe* train leaves Rapallo at 9.24. If we can get that, we're safe. We'll be across the frontier by four to-morrow morning—"

"Maybe," interrupted Marney, "but what I'm interested in is what we're going to do between now and then."

Dighton laughed.

"I'm coming to that now. I want the Chief to hire a car and have it drawn across the road round the bend, just out of sight from Ahlborg's place. As likely as not, they've posted a *carabiniere* outside and we don't want him to raise the alarm. You and I, old son, are going to board Ahlborg's saloon as soon as it stops, collar our friend and his driver and turn the 'bus back towards the *Villa Sabino*. That'll be about eight o'clock. You'll drive her back——"

"Oh, I will, will I?—And what'll you be doing all this while?"

"Me? Oh, I shall be sitting at the back, in Ahlborg's coat and hat, taking the constable's salute! But

seriously, Marney, the thing's a cinch. As soon as you give a couple of toots on the electric horn the lodge-keeper 'll come out. They're all in a blue funk of Ahlborg up there. He'll see the car and everything apparently in order, and I bet you fifty quid he'll let us through. We'll have the guns with us, of course. You'd better stop in the car with the big one and keep it trained on the garden, ready for emergencies. I'll take the other and let myself in with that key I gave you. What happens after that is in the lap of the gods, but Taverner must hold the other car in readiness for our escape."

He paused and looked at the other.

"What d'you think of it?"

"Fine!" declared Marney. "If you could think out another plan that'd relieve us from any danger at all," he added with a flash of his teeth, "I'd be a deal happier!"

"But it's good, don't you think?"

Marney slapped his knee.

"Good? Of course it's good. I'll slip along and tell the Chief about it in a minute, but I reckon he'll have no objections. There's just one thing though: What'll Ahlborg and his driver be doing while we're breaking in?"

"We'll have to tie them up and leave them for Taverner to look after." He bit his lip. "That's the only weak point in the scheme. We can't let Ahlborg live."

Marney frowned.

The business began in earnest.

Marney, quicker even than the Englishman, had leaped on to the running-board and got the driver covered. Dighton wrenched open a door and confronted the astonished Ahlborg with a weapon of his own design!

"Put 'em up!" he cried.

The chemist did not comply at first, but sat staring at an expanse of paint and hair that showed between the intruders collar and hat-brim.

"Put 'em up!" yelled Dighton again—and this time two great hands hit the roof of the saloon.

Marney, masked and jubilant, peered over the front seat.

"Had to knock my chap out," he rasped in what he believed to be an assumed voice. "There's a coil of rope at your feet. You'll want it first."

By this time Taverner, with a white silk handkerchief knotted behind his head, had put in an appearance, accompanied by another whom Marney recognised as Haye.

It took the combined efforts of the four of them to secure Ahlborg and lift him across into Taverner's car. There was a brief delay while the American got the hang of the controls, backed twenty yards to a convenient gateway and got her round.

"How's that, eh?" he inquired, glancing back.

"O.K." returned Dighton.

"There's a smell about this coat that I don't like,"

complained Marney, "and the cap's about four sizes too big."

He threw the car out of gear to assure himself that Dighton's appearance would pass muster. For the first time since he had known him, the other heard him really laugh.

"Hell!" he said. "I'll apply to Clarkson's for a job when I next see London!"

"Am I all right?" queried Dighton, feeling absurdly self-conscious.

"All right?" echoed Marney. "*You're Ahlborg!*"

Another three minutes and they were outside the gates, with the dripping sentry pulled up respectfully and the lodge-keeper hastening into the drive. He waited for what to Dighton seemed an eternity before producing a key, with Marney sitting erect like a statue and the rain streaming down the windows in merciful cataracts.

The gates swung slowly open, Dighton heard her *snick* into first and they were moving slowly up the drive towards their objective.

He breathed again.

The gates clanged shut behind them. He heard the porter saying something to the constable and the din of barking from the stables. The baying died down suddenly, as if the suspicions of the beasts were allayed by the familiar purring of the car.

"We're through," said Marney, without looking round. "I've got the big gun here beside me. I gave you the key before we started."

He pushed back the peak of the borrowed cap and mopped his forehead with a handkerchief.

"Gosh! I wouldn't go through *that* again for all the money in the United States Treasury! Go right ahead, Dighton, and good luck to you!"

They pulled up outside the main entrance and Dighton jumped to the ground.

"If you get in a hole and you want me," sang the American after him, "use the six-shooter."

"I'll leave the door unfastened," Dighton told him, "push up the catch, you know, when I get inside."

He cannoned into Gerardo in the hall, emerging from a side-door with a bundle of papers. The secretary, deceived for the space of a moment and thoroughly unnerved at Ahlborg's unexpected return, floundered on his hands and knees, retrieving documents that had blown from the pile in the draught from the open door.

Dighton pulled him to his feet by his coat-collar and sent him into a further fit of nerves by demanding in good Italian the key of the English lady's room.

The cat was out of the bag now! Whatever other qualities he possessed, Dighton was no actor. His voice, distorted as it was, bore no resemblance to that of the owner of the *Villa Sabino*. He knew in an instant that Gerardo had pierced his disguise, and kept his fingers fixed tightly on the little man's jacket. A glimpse of the weapon he carried showed Gerardo the futility of any attempt to thwart him. Acting as an unwilling guide, he led the way to a room furn-

ished like a study, drew the key from the drawer and stumbled presently up the stairs, driven by a Nemesis that brooked no denial.

At the top of the second flight he thrust the key in a lock. The door flew open, propelled by Dighton's boot, revealing a lighted interior, a single bed and Greta, rising from the chair in which she had been sitting reading.

Forgetting the painful conglomeration of paint and hair that Marney had piled on so efficiently, he expected her to recognise him instantly, and was astounded at the look of horror which shone in her eyes.

"Greta!" he cried. "It's I—Alan. Don't you know me?"

She uttered a little cry of joy.

"Alan! You have come to save me! Oh! my dear!"

She fell into his arms and Gerardo, freed from the grip of his tormentor, scuttled for the stairs like a rat.

That was Dighton's one mistake. He realised what had happened when it was too late to repair it. The appearance of *The Lizard* in the doorway followed Gerardo's exit so swiftly that he was knocked off his guard. The bullet from the other's pistol, loosed off in desperation because of the more effective weapon Dighton carried, grazed Greta's shoulder.

"Alan," she gasped; "he's hit me!"

He levelled the *Pocket Death*.

"Drop that gun, Corlitt, and put your hands up. The game's up, you understand. Taverner's outside

and we've put Ahlborg out of action. I've enough in this thing to treat the whole lot of you as you treated Daudot in the Chief's study.

The other put up his hands, but he did not relinquish the pistol.

"A smart piece of work, Dighton," he replied coldly. "I congratulate you! When I engaged you in London, I must confess I thought you too clumsy for the job. It seems I was mistaken."

He made a sudden wild leap into the passage, putting a brick wall between them in a desperate effort to win clear. Dighton had reached the door when a second report set his ears singing and he saw Marney through the bannisters.

"Pity that!" remarked the American; "but I just had to!"

He tucked a smoking automatic into his pocket.

"Tell Miss Haye to shut her eyes and bring her down right now. Things'll be getting lively in a minute!"

Dighton lifted the girl in his arms.

At the foot of the stairs he handed her over to Marney and darted up a corridor towards the laboratory door. It was locked and he had to fire into the lock to get it open. It was chill and dark inside. An odour of chemicals drifted to his nostrils.

"Anyone in there?" he shouted.

Receiving no answer, he pulled the trigger of the *Pocket Death* and sent the blue ray searching into every corner. Something sizzled violently and, with

startling suddenness, a terrific explosion shattered the roof. He backed into the passage with the noise of thunder in his ears. A gap appeared in the party-wall, with clouds of blue smoke pouring through. Masonry was falling everywhere.

"Get out—all of you!" he bellowed as he reached the steps.

He could hear sounds of screaming from the back. A startled maidservant bumped into him and hurried down the drive towards the porter's lodge. He heaved a sigh of relief. He had no quarrel with Ahlborg's staff.

"That you, Dighton?" shouted Marney from the saloon. "Say!" he continued as the other approached, "it's been a peach of a raid, and we've had our share of it out here. The long-range fellow got busy just after I carried Miss Haye in. I turned my pea-shooter on him and silenced him for a while, but he broke out again. Guess he's firing from a gun-pit or something."

Dighton climbed in.

"We must get out of this, Marney," he returned. "I'll look after this gadget while you drive the 'bus towards the gate. We'll evacuate her in the shelter of the trees and make a bolt for it."

Greta's hand pressed his arm.

"What have you been doing all this time?" she asked. "I thought those dreadful people must have killed you."

Dighton laughed.

"I'm afraid I've been acting incendiary. Lord! I was forgetting. You told me Corlitt hit you when he fired——"

"It was just a graze," she assured him. "I've bound it with my handkerchief."

"Keep down," shouted Marney from the wheel. "There's that ray again."

Dighton pulled the trigger and aimed at the spot where the trouble appeared to originate. Apparently the hidden operator was still uncertain as to the actual occupants of the saloon, for the thing like a blue searchlight fell across the drive—a menacing barrier between them and the gates. Dighton's gun hissed venomously and it petered out.

The car swerved suddenly. A moment later it had crossed the threatened area and was drawing to a standstill by the trees.

Dighton emptied his weapon at the already blazing sheds, then picked up Greta and carried her into the bushes. Marney followed. They had barely reached cover before the gates opened and Ahlborg appeared, bareheaded, with a length of rope still dangling from one leg. At his heels ran the little Italian policeman. Dighton could see his white, strained face and the carbine held in readiness.

As Ahlborg neared the house, shouting wildly as he ran, the long range gun opened fire again.

Either he had forgotten its existence, or the leaping flames from the building dazzled him, for Ahlborg did not stop. One moment he was in darkness—the

next a towering figure bathed in blue light, from which a solitary *carabiniere* staggered back, shielding his eyes.

And then he was gone!

* * * * *

They found Taverner in the road. He had come to see the effect of the flames, it transpired, and Ahlborg had taken Haye unawares. Dick Haye was in the hired car now, recovering from a sore head.

"It's a fine blaze," said Dighton, "in spite of the rain. They won't be able to get near it for hours."

Greta threw herself into Taverner's arms.

"I'm so glad to see you," she whispered. "Please let's get away from here at once. It—it frightens me."

"We're going now," he said. "You'll find your father a little further along, but you won't see very much of him, because I'm sending you to England by the *De Luxe* to-night."

Greta stared.

"Not alone?"

"Oh, no—with Alan Dighton. He'll be a bit of a crock when the excitement's worn off and he'll want looking after. I've a headquarters job waiting for him when he's fit. We're all scattering, you know. Your father and I are going to Genoa, and Marney's making a bee-line for the Swiss frontier."

They let the chauffeur go, and took the road to Rapallo. Looking back, Dighton caught many

glimpses of the burning villa. It was a magnificent fire—and he was proud of it. It stood for so many things—for Ahlborg's faded dreams of conquest, for justice, for future generations relieved of scourge, for the successful ending of a great adventure.

The sight of it checked Haye's voluble excuses for the escape of Ahlborg, the protestations of a suddenly revived affection for his daughter. The pity of it all was that he would never be able to talk of it in Rome!

* * * * *

Taverner's parting words at the station contained no promises, but conveyed a hint which was equally reassuring.

"Don't get married before I get back," he said through the window; and then—"Good luck to you both!"

THE END

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